



Organizing and Operating a Speakers' Bureau by Marcia Lovejoy

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Why Form a Speakers' Bureau?

A speakers' bureau can help eliminate the effects of stigma in a community. The word "stigma" generally means "a stain on one's good name" or a "loss of reputation." Stigma is a powerful force in shaping public opinion and the laws. The stigma of mental illness often results in economic discrimination -- in employment and housing, for example. It can cause people to treat mental health consumers differently from other people. It can cause our family members to deny that there is a problem. Worse, it can make us think about ourselves as "different" -- not as good as people who aren't consumers.

Television, the movies, novels and newspapers often show a false image of consumers as "psychotic killers" or "buffoons." So it is up to us to offer the public a true picture of ourselves.

One way to do this is by organizing a speakers' bureau. Speaking to the public about what it is like to be a consumer and about other mental health-related topics changes the way the public sees us and improves the way we see ourselves. Each person who speaks lights one more candle to end the darkness.

There are three components to operating a speakers' bureau: (1) Creating and organizing one. (2) Training yourself and others to speak to audiences effectively. (3) Maintaining or improving the quality of the services offered by your speakers' bureau.

Finding a Core Group

If you already belong to a self-help group, you may be able to get a speakers' bureau going pretty easily. If not, you'll have to start by organizing a group.

While it is brave to seek out audiences all by yourself, this has real limitations. Hearing one person speak, audiences can say, for example, "He must be an exception; very few consumers are capable of speaking." Or, "Only people who have been diagnosed as manic-depressive and who take lithium are 'okay.'" Or, "Only people who were treated in such-and-such hospital are 'okay,'" etc. But you can start a speakers' bureau with just a few people.

To find a self-help group near you, you can write or call the National Mental Health Consumer Self-Help Clearinghouse, which published this pamphlet (see address at end). Other sources of this information include: Mental Health Associations, Alliance for the Mentally Ill groups, and groups such as Emotions Anonymous and Recovery. (The white pages of your phone book may have these numbers, or the National Mental Health Consumer Self-Help Clearinghouse can supply them.)

Once you find a group, you can attend a meeting and propose the creation of a speakers' bureau -- but don't expect that they will drop everything to do this. Emphasize that the speakers' bureau will not conflict with their meeting time. Also, tell people that even if they don't want to speak, there are many other tasks that need doing.

If, after trying hard, you are unable to find a peer group meeting to attend, you should start your own. (Editor's note: For more information about this, see "How to Start a Self-Help/Advocacy Group," also published by the National Mental Health Consumer Self-Help Clearinghouse.)

Working with the Media

Contact local papers to get them to write an article about your experiences as a consumer and your goal of starting a speakers' bureau. Newspapers look for material that has a "hook": that is, material that is timely or involves action. Your desire to form a speakers' bureau gives your story that "hook."

You can submit a press release, which is like an article. Always include the name and phone number of a contact person at the top. If you don't have letterhead, type your group's name and address at-the top also.

A press release should be about 300 words (one typewritten page double-spaced). It must be typed -- busy reporters and editors will rarely take the time to read handwriting, no matter how neat. On your group's letterhead, or with your group's name, address and phone number typed at the top, your press release might look something like this:

Press Release

For Immediate Release Contact: Jane Doe, (555) 555-5555

Mental Patients Form Speakers' Bureau to Fight Stigma

City, State -- When Jane Doe was a young woman, she spent five years on a back ward of a state psychiatric hospital .

Now Jane, who at 48 is a writer and editor and has a husband and two children, wants people to know that there is life after psychiatric hospitalization.

"They said I'd spend the rest of my life in the hospital," Jane said. "I said I wouldn't."

Now Jane has organized a speakers' bureau so that she and other former mental patients can fight the stigma of mental illness, and inspire other people who have been hospitalized for mental illness to come forward.

"There's strength in numbers," said Jane. "The more of us who stand up and speak out, the sooner we will end the stigma of mental illness and the resulting economic and social discrimination."

For more information about the speakers' bureau, contact Jane Doe, (name of group), (address), (phone number).

* * *

This is only about 150 words, but it reads like a newspaper article and a small newspaper might decide to run it "as is." It might also interest an editor in assigning a reporter to write a story about Jane Doe and the speakers' bureau.

You should also enclose, as background, other related newspaper clippings, such as an article about another local consumer group and/or the National Mental Health Consumers' Association. Do not send too much or none of it will be read. Send your letter to the attention of the "City Desk." Better still, call the newspaper and find out the name of the City Editor, so you can address that person directly.

In an interview, be as warm and gracious as you can be. You're trying to educate reporters, not punish them. Don't say, "You reporters always portray us as dangerous or feeble-minded." Instead, say, "Would you help us improve the image of people with mental illness?" How can they refuse?

Developing Speakers

Your next step as a group is to work on becoming effective public speakers. Each person must write his or her own speech. Then, listen to each other and give (and receive) usable feedback, both positive and negative. We all need a mirror to see ourselves clearly.

Discussing public speeches you attend together can build up skills in listening critically.

Listening to someone give a sales presentation can also be helpful. If your area has a Toastmaster chapter, you might have a source of excellent "teachers."

Any good speech should: (1) be easily heard; (2) be in easy-to-understand language; (3) be given at a pace that the audience can follow; (4) have a point or message that the audience can understand; (5) end before the audience's attention drifts.

When you are listening to a speech, ask yourself: Did the point of the speech come across? Was it clear? If not, why not? Did the speaker use terms that you were unfamiliar with which they did not define? Did the speaker seem to enjoy talking or seem bored?

What in their voice or actions gave you these impressions? Was the presentation too long? Did the speaker speak too fast or go from one point to another too fast? How did the rest of the audience react? Did people appear to be falling asleep? Was there a lot of shuffling of feet and coughing? Did people seem eager to ask questions? Did they surround the speaker at the end or did the room empty quickly? What could have improved the speech?

This exercise will help you as a speaker and as a critic. If you are afraid to say anything critical to each other then you'll never help each other improve.

Writing Your First Speech

As you write your first speech, keep two things in mind: One, you are the expert in explaining your life and perceptions. Two, you have no right to pretend that your experiences and perceptions represent those of other consumers. You should use "first-person" statements, such as "my experience with day treatment was . . ." or "for me, having a doctor make decisions for me was . . ." There are other times when it is appropriate to use the third person; for example: "We were all so bored on the ward, people just sat around and smoked and slept and played solitaire -- even though the deck only had 49 cards!"

Don't spend time rehashing your childhood or family history to "explain" why you have become diagnosed as mentally ill. Focusing on the past can really bore audiences.

Humor can be effective. As you relax, humor may flow naturally. If not, don't force it.

Here are some questions to consider in writing about your life:

1. When did I first enter into formal treatment?
2. What were the circumstances?

3. How did I feel and how did my life change from that first experience?
4. How was my attitude toward myself, others, and the world affected?
5. What people or experiences after that made my life better or worse?
6. Of the bad experiences, which one was worst? Why?
7. Of the good experiences, which was the best? Why?
8. Outside of psychiatric experiences, what has influenced me (for example, marriage, friends, religion, school, books, jobs, etc.)?
9. Why am I joining this speakers' bureau? What is hard about doing this? What feels good?
10. What is different about me now, compared to how I felt and acted in the past?
11. What things do I enjoy in my present life?
12. What do I want from my future? What am I doing to get what I want?
13. Where do I get support in moving toward these goals and coping with everyday stress?

This will likely give you a speech that is much too long; your speech should only be 15 to 20 minutes. However, considering all these questions in advance may help you answer questions from the audience.

Your experiences may well cover dozens of pages. Now reduce them to a one-page outline. (If there is something so painful that you can't talk about it without becoming terribly upset, then leave it out.)

Practicing as a Group

The next step as a group is to listen to each speaker and give feedback. Speaking formally is good practice so each person should stand and others listen without interruption, and applaud at the end before having the person share how it felt. Then each person present should give positive feedback and then some constructive criticism or questions about something that confused them. Pair off with someone whose speaking style you admired; have them help you with your speech. Plan at least one follow-up "dress rehearsal," discussion and feedback process.

Verbal Presentation

Present a positive visual image. People judge by appearances. If you only have one "good" outfit, wear it.

Choose one member of the group to introduce all the speakers. Don't read your speech; your audience will be bored. Make index cards with key phrases. Then you can glance at them as you speak to keep yourself on track.

Make every effort to overcome physical barriers to being heard, such as an echoing room or one that is so full of carpeting and/or people that it is difficult to hear a normal voice.

Stand to speak. You can hang on to a podium or stand behind a chair, but stand. If you are afraid and shaking, admit it to the audience. It will win their sympathy and they will admire your courage.

Ask the audience to hold their questions until all the speakers have spoken. However, ask them to "please applaud each speaker -- we all like the reassurance."

After the last speaker, the person who has introduced the speakers can say that they are now open to questions. But don't feel you have let folks down by not answering every question. Always leave an audience wanting more; this can lead to future invitations to speak. Also make sure you tell folks how to get in touch with you so they can find out more. Either have a handout about your group with contact address and phone number available or print the name, address and phone numbers on a chalkboard.

Topical Speeches

A speakers' bureau is really a resource bank of experts. The members have gone through many experiences: commitment, hospitalization, psychotropic drugs, clinics, therapy, Electro-Convulsive Therapy (ECT), group homes, foster care, etc. Some may have experienced depression and suicide attempts; others may have lost jobs, friends, even a place to live. From these experiences comes knowledge. You can use this knowledge to educate your audiences.

Make a list of topics that your group can present on. Possible topics: commitment, suicide, crisis services, self-help models, empowerment, manic-depression, schizophrenia.

A catchy title may get people's attention. Some examples are: "Everything you wanted to know about being crazy but were afraid to ask," "Still crazy after all these cures," "Crazy but making it," "You don't have to be crazy to be committed in this state." Other lectures have been titled "Mental health care -- a view from the middle," "Homeless mentally ill -- a view from the street," "A consumer perspective on delivery of mental health services," "Surviving mental illness."

Expand your services to meet the audience's unique interests. For example, you might speak to a convention of social workers about experiences your speakers have had -- good, bad, and indifferent -- with social workers. Offer constructive criticism about how they could do their jobs better.

Try to be as specific as possible when you speak. Anecdotes -- stories -- make your speech livelier. The speech about your life experiences will naturally have plenty of anecdotes. But include anecdotes in the topical speeches also. If you're talking about psychotropic drugs, include an experience you had with these drugs to make your point. (Again, don't generalize -- a drug may have harmed you, but helps a friend of yours.)

Who Are Your Audiences?

Here is a list of just some of your potential audiences: high schools, colleges and vocational schools; business social clubs; community centers; church congregations, study or social groups; staff at various service programs; vocational counselors; public defenders; hospital and outpatient staff; and provider, family and consumer organizations.

Advertising

You now have a service and you need to publicize it. Outreach or advertising always takes money, effort and follow-up. You have to contact these groups and "sell" them. In other words, tell them what you have to offer and how they will benefit from it. An easy way to start is having your members contact people they know in the community who may be involved with church groups, school groups, etc.

Once you have made a presentation that has gone well, you can list that group as a reference when you contact other groups.

Many newspapers have "bulletin board" sections in which you can run a free classified ad. You can also do a mailing to groups that might be interested in hearing you speak.

Getting started is the hardest part; but if you work hard, show up on time, and make a thoughtful presentation, you will quickly hear from other interested groups and will find easy access to most groups you approach.

Some groups pay to print flyers or brochures advertising their group. But a well-done presentation is more effective advertising than the fanciest brochure.

Give your speakers' bureau a name. You can call it by your group's name -- if your group is the Survivors, you can call it the Survivors Speakers' Bureau. Or think up a separate name, such as "Project Education" or "Can We Talk?" Check the telephone yellow pages and white pages to make sure no other group in your area is using the name you are considering.

The phone is an excellent way to start advertising your speakers' bureau. Begin by saying that "we have an educational service available to your organization. Are you the person I should talk to about arranging a presentation?" Otherwise, you may end up wasting time with people who are not the decision-makers.

Very often, you will have to leave a number so that someone can call you back. If the number is your home number, don't mention that. Do give days and hours that you will be available at the number, and then make sure the phone is covered at those times by yourself or another knowledgeable person. It is extremely important that you give the impression that you are professional and responsible.

You may use an answering machine. If you do, make sure you return calls promptly.

How much should you charge, if anything? Under the theory that "you get what you pay for," people seem to value a free service less than one that costs money. You can say something like, "We charge \$25 an hour, but the fee can be waived if your group qualifies as charitable or non-profit." (For more information about fees, see the section on "Costs and Fund-Raising.") Many of your callers will ask for written material about your group. The most inexpensive way to provide that is to type or have someone with calligraphic skills draft a single-sided 8-1/2" x 11" ad. Put your group's name in "bold" or use a letterhead if your group has one. In large type, give a brief paragraph about your service and group. You may add another paragraph about stigma or the national mental health consumer movement or add a separate page of Xeroxed copy, such as a newspaper article, about that subject. Clearly state your phone number, hours and mailing address. If you are using someone else's phone, for example a mental health center, list a name as contact. After you have made one or two successful presentations, include references from satisfied customers.

Don't tell people you are available "anytime" even when you are first getting started and you are. If your services seem popular, people will be more interested in using them. If someone asks when you are available, say, "We have some dates open; what day of the week would be best for you? If they say, "Thursday," you can say, "We could do it on the 17th." If they say that the 17th is no good but how about the 24th, you can say, "What time?" When they tell you, you can say, "Yes, I believe we can be there." As you gain a reputation, pretty soon your calendar really will be full.

Who should you call to drum up business? Social clubs of business people often meet regularly. Contact their main office. Churches and synagogues also often have social clubs. Contact the minister, rabbi, or church secretary to offer your service.

High schools are an excellent audience. However, some people find them a challenge. If teenagers make you nervous, don't try to participate in presentations for this group.

To arrange to speak to schools, call the office and ask for the names of teachers of courses on psychology, health, sociology, family, etc. Most teachers will be in class and have to call you back, or you will have to call them back during their "preparation hour," or within 15 minutes of their last class. Give them the names of other schools you have spoken at or ask if they want to hear your group speaking elsewhere before they invite you to their school. Sometimes meeting with the guidance counselor and/or principal or asking them to attend a presentation by your group can result in an invitation to present to the whole student body at an assembly.

College and vocational classes are another source of audiences. You can request a catalogue of classes which will give you course descriptions and teachers' names. In vocational schools, look for classes directed at nurses' aides and health technicians.

You can also offer "inservice" presentations to staff working at mental health centers, private hospitals, state hospitals and treatment programs. General hospitals often have mental health units. Call and find out who is in charge of "inservice." Sometimes this is a particular nursing supervisor or the director of nursing or a continuing education department person. Get the correct spelling of their name, their correct title and address. Type a letter briefly stating your interest in making a presentation. Don't mention any exact cost and do mention a few other groups you have presented to. Say you will be calling to follow up this letter or they can contact you, and give the phone number and times. Then follow up about a week later with a phone call.

Final Arrangements

Questions to ask when making final arrangements (by this time you have already established the fee -- if any -- and the exact date and time).

1. How many people are expected to attend? With an audience of 30 or fewer people, allot 30 to 40 minutes for the presentation with an additional minimum of 15 minutes for questions and answers [Q&A]; for 30-60 people, around the same

- length of the lecture with perhaps 25 minutes for Q&A; with 60 to 100 in the audience, a slightly longer presentation -and then at least 30 minutes for Q&A.)
2. What is the exact location (street address and room number)?
 3. Is there a telephone at the location in case you need to call at the last minute?
What is the phone number?
 4. Is it near public transportation? (Get exact directions.)
 5. Is there parking nearby? (If you're driving, get directions.)
 6. Is the building wheelchair-accessible?

Ask the person you are dealing with to post signs at entrances and in corridors directing people to the event. This is vital, especially if you want to attract passersby.

Evaluation

After every presentation, hand out evaluation sheets. (Bring pencils; you can get a box of inexpensive "golf" pencils at any stationery store.) Keep your evaluation form simple and in easy-to-read type; people are more likely to fill it out. Make most of it multiple choice. That is, you can ask people to rate various aspects of the presentation on a grid, like the following:

Excellent Very Good Good Fair Poor

Also include some space for additional comments. Important: Include some lines at the bottom for people to fill out their name, address and phone number if they want to be added to your mailing list -- that is, if you have a mailing list.

Each evaluation sheet should have a line for date and location, so you can keep track of where the evaluations came from.

You may want to develop a special evaluation sheet to use for professional audiences. You can use your responses as documentation that you offer a valuable service if you want to apply for a training grant to teach professionals or to offer Continuing Education Units. (Each state has its own procedures for arranging this.)

Don't rely on your evaluation forms for a count of your audience; not everyone will turn one in. Do "count the house" and keep records of your presentations with the numbers you spoke to and the evaluation forms you receive; it is vital to be able to prove the success of your speakers' bureau if you apply for funding.

Costs and Raising Money

Decide as a group if you want to pay speakers for each presentation plus travel expenses. Or you can pay all who perform any task: speaking, driving, typing, mailing, making posters, etc. You may decide to compensate members only for bus fare or gas mileage and invest the profits, for example, in an answering machine or a post office box.

Ask other organizations -- for instance, churches, independent living centers, law projects, gay rights' groups, women's rights groups -- if they will let you use some office

space. (However, all you really need to operate your speakers' bureau is a telephone and a mailing address.)

When you collect fees, pay stipends and such overhead costs as rent and phone, you can quickly find that you will need to either belong to another non-profit agency or file for your own non-profit status. The latter can be expensive. It is often a good idea to work together for at least a year before seeking non-profit status. There are special financial reports and records that must be kept in order to finalize your status as a non-profit organization.

Although you can't apply for foundation grants unless you have non-profit status, you can channel your grant application through a "fiscal sponsor." A fiscal sponsor is some organization that is willing to let you use their non-profit status to apply, and then turn the money over to you. (Any such arrangement should be spelled out in a contract between your group and your fiscal sponsor, in order to protect the interests and autonomy of your group.) As a social group you don't require legal status. You can accept donations but cannot offer your contributors a tax write-off. Nor are you exempt from sales tax, as non-profit organizations are.

You can ask for free advice from SCORE (Senior Corps Of Retired Executives), which operates in many if not all states. You can also request free help from business people, lawyers or Certified Public Accountants, many of whom might offer their services on a "pro bono publico" (for the good of the public) -- that is, free -- basis. You can also advertise for volunteers experienced in financial planning. (As described above under "Advertising," you may be able to run such ads for free.)

What are some other ways to make money? You can offer presentations open to the public and have volunteers standing with donation cans and smiles at the exits. You also can consider sales although this can take money to "make" money. T-shirts are a possibility but can be expensive and leave you with an assortment of odd sizes and little profit. Buttons are cheaper and one size fits all. Sometimes churches will allow a group to hold an after-services sale of baked goods, buttons, etc.

There is also such a thing as "in-kind" donations. For example, if a group cannot offer a fee, ask if they would be willing to copy your handouts and evaluation sheets on their equipment.

Sometimes you can interest a local business in underwriting some of your printing costs. Offer to "plug" their business on the bottom of your flyers or evaluation sheets in exchange for their printing them. (For instance, the bottom of the sheet could say, "Printing made possible by a generous donation from Johnson Pharmacy.") If you explain that your group will be distributing the flyers to hundreds of individuals in their area, they may be eager to contribute in order to advertise and promote good will. Make an agreement in writing that sets out the amount they will contribute and distribution until supplies are gone or "X" number of months have elapsed.

Many groups that cannot pay honorariums can offer mileage costs and a token donation. High schools rarely pay speakers; most professional organizations do pay. Ask if they have a "usual fee" they offer. If they don't or if it varies, ask how much the last two presenters were paid. Remember, you're worth it.

Potential Problems

An important consideration is the possibility of lawsuit. Of course, it is impossible to prevent someone from bringing a lawsuit against your organization. But luckily, this is a rare occurrence. To avoid being sued for slander, consider using phony names for doctors, hospitals, etc., that you are criticizing. Tell the audience that you have changed the names. And always tell the truth -- don't exaggerate. A calm presentation of the facts is more effective than an angry tirade. For example, don't say, "Dr. Smith is nothing but a crook! He took my insurance benefits and never even talked to me once." Instead, say, "Dr. Missing -- that's not his real name -- billed my insurance company for a daily consultation fee even though I never saw him once in my six weeks of hospitalization." (And give credit where credit is due: Praise staff that were compassionate and helpful.)

If people car-pool to speaking engagements you should get special insurance that would cover any personal injury claim not covered by the driver's insurance. Never allow people to drive without insurance or in an unsafe manner or in a car in poor mechanical repair.

GOOD LUCK WITH YOUR SPEAKERS' BUREAU!