



Assertive Community Treatment

Promising Practices & Lessons Learned



What Telecare Has Discovered About Barriers to Effectiveness and Overcoming Service Challenges

Assertive Community Treatment is a comprehensive, community-based service delivery approach for individuals with serious mental illness (SMI) who do not respond well to less intensive services and are otherwise at risk of inpatient hospitalization. Developed in Madison, Wisconsin by Stein and Test in the 1970s, the ACT model is built on the belief that people with serious mental illnesses can achieve better results by living in the community as they receive highly supportive, individualized mental health services.

California's Mental Health Services Act of 2004 (Proposition 63) provides an opportunity for approaches such as the ACT model to be incorporated into the "Full Service Partnership" or FSP, thus assuring services to unserved and underserved populations throughout the state. A majority of the state's MHSA community services and supports funds must be utilized to provide FSP services.

Telecare's extensive experience in providing ACT services since 1994 brings specialized strengths and insights to our partnerships. As one of the largest providers in California, we've discovered that although the structure and philosophy of the ACT model provide a foundation for success, there are many other factors — many of them highly nuanced — that play a profound role in a program's success. It is our intention to share our experience and results in a summarized form in these pages.





Telecare's ACT Services

Telecare operates more ACT programs than any other provider in California and provides specialized services to populations with complex challenges including those that are dually diagnosed, have a history of assaultive behavior, or are coming out of jails or long-term locked inpatient settings.

Telecare has provided ACT services since 1994. Our average program has 125 clients who receive “whatever it takes” services, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. ACT has been studied more extensively than any other community mental health treatment approach. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of ACT in decreasing the use of acute psychiatric hospitalization, with higher levels of housing stability and client and family satisfaction. There is evidence that with additional focused resources, positive outcomes can be achieved in the areas of homelessness, jail/arrests, employment, and substance abuse.

Telecare's oldest ACT program, Alameda STRIDES, participated in a four-year study to evaluate its effectiveness. During that four-year period, Alameda STRIDES clients spent one-seventh the number of institutional days as the comparison group. Comparison clients spent a total of 15,036 days in institutions, while STRIDES clients spent 1,971 days in institutions. In the fourth year, STRIDES' cost per client was net \$11,035, as compared to \$25,682 in the comparison group. Over the four years, STRIDES produced a net savings of \$2,338,490.

The Recovery Model

Setting up an ACT program can seem very straight-forward from an administrative perspective, but achieving the hoped-for recovery is a far more nuanced endeavor.

Telecare is an innovator in building well-researched, proven, successful programs to engage the people others have given up on. Recovery is woven into and defines every aspect of Telecare's programs, from assessments and interventions, to the client information system, the selection of staff, and the overall client experience.

Building on traditional ACT standards, Telecare has created a recovery-focused client experience. We do this by meeting clients “where they are” to facilitate engagement, and by supporting them in taking responsibility for their own recovery, believing in their abilities, and questioning assumptions that limit their potential opportunities.

CARF Accreditation

Telecare was recently awarded a three-year accreditation from the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF).

Telecare's ACT programs received a commendation of excellence and were acknowledged with the following:

“Telecare's assertive community treatment (ACT) teams provide exceptional community integration services. Persons served, funders, and other stakeholders comment on the commitment, depth, and creative approaches to supporting persons served in their communities and decreasing use of emergency services and hospitalizations.

The programs demonstrate commendable advocacy and support services for the persons served.

ACT Principles

1. Services are targeted to a specified group of individuals with SMI
2. Rather than brokering services, treatment, support, and rehabilitation services are provided directly by the ACT team
3. Team members share responsibility for the individuals served
4. The staff-to-consumer ratio is small (approximately 1 to 10)
5. The range of treatment and services is comprehensive and flexible
6. Interventions are carried out at the locations where problems occur and support is needed rather than in hospital or clinic settings
7. There is no arbitrary time limit on receiving services
8. Treatment and support services are individualized
9. Services are available on a 24-hour basis
10. The team is assertive in engaging individuals in treatment and monitoring their progress

Planning, Preparation & Start-Up

Program effectiveness can be dramatically improved through a well-managed start-up process.

Start-Up & Engagement:

System Challenges:

- ★ Programs must often be up and running quickly to meet immediate consumer, financial or system needs

Consumer Challenges:

- ★ Past experience with mental health services is often negative; individuals are often reluctant to accept or engage in services, or trust new providers

Observations and Experiences:

Start-up and enrollment usually take longer than anticipated. Programmatically, they can be hindered by local or regional challenges, such as staffing shortages, real estate availability, etc. The initial demand on administrative resources is high, including site location, hiring, staff training, and development of program protocols, as well as methods for interfacing with county systems. From an enrollment perspective, engagement is a subtle art, which generally requires patience and small steps forward. It also involves listening, being consistent, and addressing needs, both large and small.

Telecare's Recommendations:

- Put administrative staff and resources in place early to guide and support start-up process
- Anticipate and make available adequate funding (including discretionary funds) for initial outreach and enrollment of clients before beginning program operations
- Incorporate proven recovery approaches into program design, and in particular, in the engagement progress; this enables staff to meet clients "where they are", provide tangible assistance up front (which can be as simple as a meal and a hot shower), and build relationships and trust, which are critical for long-term success

Implementing the ACT Model

System Challenges:

- ★ Traditional treatment approaches are often deeply ingrained; shifting to a new model requires dramatic changes which can incur resistance

Consumer Challenges:

- ★ For individuals accustomed to being the "patient," assuming a more active role in treatment can feel unfamiliar and uncertain

Observations and Experiences:

Recovery is based on personal choice, empowerment, and the ability to achieve the goals one sets for oneself — including learning how to reduce risk and harm. In terms of program structure, it entails shifting from an individual to shared caseload, increasing cooperation among staff and physicians, and cultivating flexibility in job scope and responsibilities. From a clinical perspective, it means accepting the client as an equal partner in treatment; sharing power and control; and creating space for clients to set goals, take risks, make mistakes, and rebuild the necessary life skills and confidence to guide their own recovery journeys.

Telecare's Recommendations:

- Incorporate a proven, highly individualized Harm Reduction model
- Wherever possible, hire staff, program administrators, and psychiatrists with community mental health experience
- Hire consumers as staff, who can provide peer support and personal experience in navigating the recovery process
- Provide extensive training to staff on recovery-focused assessment and planning tools
- Provide leadership and training that focuses on building cohesive staff and creating effective teams

Working with Clients and Families

Recovery is strengthened by working with people holistically, and meeting both clinical and life needs

Clients with Complex Needs

System Challenges:

- ★ Systems of care often separate or delineate services, such as behavioral health and drug/alcohol services; individuals with complex needs — particularly those with co-occurring disorders or histories of violence, trauma or physical illness — have historically been costly to the system and hard to serve effectively

Consumer Challenges:

- ★ Compartmentalized services can lead to inconsistent and incomplete treatment, leaving the individual feeling “shuffled around” and not well cared for

Observations and Experiences:

Integrated and intensive support is essential. Telecare uses a recovery-based approach that is client-centered and looks at each individual as a whole person vs. a series of unrelated problems to be solved. Treatment of “illness” is only one small piece of the puzzle. In tandem is the critical work of rebuilding life skills, creating a home, finding meaningful work, and reclaiming life-roles. Telecare is often the first to ask clients about their dreams and help align them with their goals. Cultivating strengths is a very effective way for individuals to reduce harm and create more hopeful, positive lives.

Telecare’s Recommendations:

- Create integrated programs with the capacity to serve co-occurring disorders
- Deliver treatment holistically and concurrently vs. separately and sequentially
- Move beyond the traditional approach of monitoring medication and setting expectations, and engage the whole person in a 360 degree manner
- Incorporate a Harm Reduction model, and be vigilant in its application; strict enforcement of abstinence requirements can alienate individuals who are otherwise making steady progress
- Shift power back to program clients in setting goals and treatment approaches; support individuals to believe in their abilities and question limiting beliefs

Re-engaging Family Members

System Challenges:

- ★ Family members often serve as a natural support or bridge between the client and service provider, thus supporting the overall system of care; when client/family ties are damaged from burnout and stress, these supports are weakened

Consumer Challenges:

- ★ Meaningful relationships are very important to people in recovery; without them, clients often feel isolated and without support

Observations and Experiences:

The ability to give and receive love is a fundamental part of the recovery process. However, when families and clients have a long history of strained relations and frustrated hopes, it can create barriers for all parties. Re-engaging family members is a slow, steady process that is strengthened by special attention to individual needs and family dynamics. By addressing lingering hurts and practical concerns, clients and families are often able to find new ways of relating and begin sharing in the recovery process.

Telecare’s Recommendations:

- Reach out to family members using a very flexible approach and consistent, unpressured contact
- Be a valuable resource for information through NAMI and other venues
- Extend positive news and feelings by calling family members with good news, not just when the client “needs” something
- Be patient; client-family relationships take time and nurturing, but are invaluable in rebuilding natural support systems

Putting it Into Practice Every Day

The recovery journey is supported by clinical excellence and a compassionate, whole-life perspective

“Whatever it Takes”

System Challenges:

- ★ Individuals with complex illnesses and challenging behaviors can often consume 70% or more of a system’s resources through inappropriate or over-utilization of the most expensive services such as emergency rooms, acute hospitals and IMDs; often, this creates overcrowding and unnecessary use of jails and law enforcement services; despite high utilization, there is often little sustained improvement

Consumer Challenges:

- ★ For some clients, especially those with complex needs, it can be difficult to find providers and services that will “stick with you,” and help stop the cycle of hospitalizations and life-disruption

Observations and Experiences:

Good staff-client relationships, and the ability to sustain these over time, are a significant factor in a client’s success. Clients can flourish with consistent, dependable people there to back them up, and staff who meet them where they are. Challenging behaviors are often tools people use to protect themselves. By focusing instead on helping people see that they have choices in their lives, these behaviors are naturally evaluated and reconsidered. Additionally, by taking a team approach, where all staff are intimately aware of the client’s needs — and defenses — and are committed to creating whole-life, wrap-around support, ACT programs can be successful where others are not.

Telecare’s Recommendations:

- Select staff with their passion and personal values in mind, and provide on-going training and support
- Ask clients what they truly want and need, and build client involvement in the recovery process
- Hire peer staff whose own experiences can provide hope and inspiration to others in recovery
- Listen well and always follow through on commitments to clients
- Collaborate with other providers to create a fluid network of care for clients
- Create close ties with the jail system, drug courts and other agencies

Housing Hurdles

System Challenges:

- ★ Most systems of care lack adequate supplies of safe, affordable housing; development of new housing options, particularly for individuals with special needs, is often highly politicized

Consumer Challenges:

- ★ A home creates a sense of pride and foundation; for many people, the ability to live independently is a symbolic and significant milestone in recovery

Observations and Experiences:

Often a significant amount of a team’s time is devoted to housing. Clients often move to new housing several times a year and NIMBY issues are especially acute for clients with exceptional needs. It takes full-time resources to not only locate housing options, but to effectively manage the relationships with housing providers. By assuaging concerns, providing education, advocating for clients, and being reliable and trustworthy in all interactions, it is possible to overcome many barriers and concerns. For clients with special needs — older adults, dually diagnosed and transitional age youth — housing partnerships require more planning, communication, and external supports to make them successful.

Telecare’s Recommendations:

- Have a dedicated housing specialist as part of the multidisciplinary team
- Establish good relationships with the housing authorities to increase understanding and secure housing vouchers
- Create a network of support services and skill building for special populations
- Respond to housing provider issues immediately

Conservators and Rep Payees

System Challenges:

- ★ Systems of care are responsible for individuals under public guardianship; they must balance the wishes of the individual with the need to reduce both risk and cost to the community and system of care

Consumer Challenges:

- ★ Money is a means of independence; in a system that denies or withholds a client's access to his or her money, it is common for clients to feel frustrated and "incapable" of taking care of themselves

Observations and Experiences:

Telecare's recovery model focuses on increasing client independence, empowerment, and personal choice. Control over money can be a complicated issue, and is made more challenging when the program serves as the conservator and the rep payee. Telecare approaches this by being extremely flexible and adjusting to the needs and concerns of the client and public guardian. Sometimes, it means striving to get clients off conservatorship. At others, it means finding a different rep payee. In almost all cases, it involves education and building awareness about recovery, and how effective choice-making — especially around money — is taught and supported, fostering a sense of personal empowerment.

Telecare's Recommendations:

- Partner with the public guardian's office early in the process
- Build client skills around choice and money management
- Understand both system and client needs, as well as potential challenges

Areas for Growth

Focal points for ongoing improvement

Employment for Clients

System Challenges:

- ★ Systems of care must pick and choose services to be delivered; with limited funds, employment services tend to move to the back burner

Consumer Challenges:

- ★ Having a purpose and making a contribution are important steps in recovery from serious mental illness; without support, finding and sustaining meaningful work can be daunting and prone to failure

Observations and Experiences:

Teams need a specialized employment person to deliver this service well. Despite strides in medications that have helped clients remain stable and increase their length of employment, there is still the possibility that illnesses can relapse. One way Telecare has approached this is by providing support at the place of employment. Unfortunately, this support is frequently not reimbursed, creating gaps in service and recovery. As California counties implement the Mental Health Services Act (Prop 63), it is essential to consider ways to build a more recovery-oriented approach to client work, study and skill-building.

Suggestions and Opportunities:

- Add vocational rehab and employment services to ACT programs
- Consider additional resources for individuals who are coming out of long-term institutional environments to combat "learned helplessness"

