

Dialogue



The newsletter of the Human Resources Division, Spring/Summer 2014

An Advocate becomes a leader:

A conversation with Russell Pierce, Director of the Office of Recovery and Empowerment
Contributing author: Lisa Harrison, EEO Compliance Officer and Systems Administrator

For almost the last 30 years Russell Pierce has been involved with consumer advocacy in the mental health community. This experience led Russell to where he sits today as the Director of the Office of Recovery and Empowerment (ORE) at the Department of Mental Health (DMH). Russell has had many successes in his life; however, directing ORE represents not only a professional accomplishment, but also a personal one.

The motivation that gave Russell the fuel to become a consumer advocate was when he was personally diagnosed and treated. Russell began to educate himself in the field of consumer choice and advocacy (also referred to as peer operated services). He then began to network and meet other advocates. He did not want to be afraid of his diagnosis or allow it to hold him back, instead he wanted to be the voice for others in this community and give people the strength to overcome adversity.

Peer operated services or consumer-operated services have been in existence since 1935 with the creation of groups such as Alcoholic Anonymous (AA). AA is notably one of the most commonly known peer operated service in the nation. This idea for people to lean on peers, who are experiencing similar challenges, is one that people have relied on for centuries. This dynamic gives many people great comfort to be able to empathize with others and become empowered by sharing experiences.



The Commonwealth: Working to be a Model Employer

Dialogue – Page 2

Russell's commitment to this model of mental health is woven through-out his career. Approximately three decades ago Russell was the chair of the Nebraska Mental Health Planning Council. In this capacity in addition to providing a focus on legal reform on situational justice issues, he also worked to promote consumer participation and advocacy. Russell later became Chair of the Consumer/Survivor subcommittee at the Federal Center for Mental Health Services within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. During this time he lent expertise to debate among world mental health planners on best practices for treatment in managed care environments. The focus for Russell consistently remained with consumer choice. These experiences laid the ground work for what Russell is doing today as the Director of ORE.

ORE was established to reflect the voice of mental health consumers and peers in the policy, design and implementation of DMH programs and services. Developing supports, systems and services with special emphasis on trauma informed care that is both person-centered and person-driven is the top priority. In his role, Russell leads the department into including peer voices into the policy making of DMH. In this model Russell explains recovery is based on spirituality, individuality, increasing life satisfaction, and community engagement.

In 2013 DMH created the Office of Recovery and Empowerment in recognition of expanding the peer workforce, informing the system on the principles of consumer choice, and raising awareness among the mental health community. What makes this office unique from other peer operated services is that the commitment to the programming of this office has been directly supported by Commissioner Fowler. Her dedication to the activities brought forth by ORE, the decisions presented by consumers, and the presence that ORE has in the leadership of DMH is unwavering.

The foundational elements of ORE together consist of freedom, independence, choice and mutual support while recognizing that the pathway to recovery exists on a continuum and no one approach is better than another. ORE works with all stakeholders in the mental health community including the DMH-funded Recovery Learning Communities (RLCs); the Council on Recovery and Empowerment, an advisory group to DMH; and the Mental Health Planning Council. ORE's sphere also includes elderly citizens and LGBTQ communities. ORE is proof that DMH's openness to include members of the peer community and welcome them to the table of decision making and building relationships that make it possible to deliver services and supports to the peer and provider community. We know there is much to be done in reducing stigma and harmful attitudes toward individuals living with mental illness and in assuring access to appropriate services or dealing with human rights issues. The ORE staff are people who care and whose pasts serve as a reminder that healing and transformation is possible.



Dialogue – Page 3

History has shown that when adversity strikes and people work together to overcome obstacles, we become stronger from this experience. Russell is a testament to this model. Russell's own journey of confronting his struggle, treating his differences and empowering others through his own experience is what has brought him to the success he has today. Working at ORE has been a wonderful marriage of leading by example and it is the hope that over time, the entire system will follow.



The Commonwealth: Working to be a Model Employer

Why We Stay?

Retaining State Employees with Disabilities

By Lisa Harrison, EEO Compliance Officer and System Administrator

Before even entering the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (MCDHH) Jonathan O'Dell and I ring a doorbell, triggering a light to blink in the receptionist office. Out walks Congetta Koetteritz, smiling, simultaneously speaking to me and using sign language. Standing in the doorway, I notice accessibility immediately. A feeling of inclusion and welcoming is exuded as I walk down the hallway towards Jon's office space. Accessible lighting - doorbell lights and fire alarm strobe signalers - lines the way outside of cubicles for those on staff who are Deaf or hard of hearing. "You matter", are the two words that come to mind. These two words explain how the Commonwealth is becoming a Model Employer.



Figure 1: Hallway outside MCDHH showing the placement of fire alarm over cubicles and doorbell lights



Dialogue – Page 5

Jonathan O’Dell, Assistive Technology Manager/Training Specialist and Carl Richardson, State House ADA Coordinator, exemplify how the executive branch emphasizes the importance of retaining employees with disabilities. Having a sense of belonging is important to most employees and will not only lead to positive work productivity, but also helps with retention. Beyond feeling like the Commonwealth provides both Jon and Carl with a welcoming environment, they have both felt empowered to implement changes that improve accessibility for all Commonwealth employees.

When Jon was 10 years old, he lost his hearing. Jon used hearing aids for much of his life, but made the transition to Cochlear Implants when his hearing continued to deteriorate. A Cochlear Implant is an electronic device where the microphone and processor, usually worn behind the ear, transmit electrical signals through a magnetic headpiece to a receiver implanted under the skin. From there, the signals travel through electrodes implanted in his cochlea, where the auditory nerve is stimulated and sends signals to the brain to replicate "sound" awareness. Even with cochlear implants, Jon still does not hear perfectly and sometimes relies on reasonable accommodation such as American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters and/or CART providers, who transcribe spoken language into written real-time text. Having accessibility at work “allows employees to participate,” says Jon. This participation is essential in employee engagement, performance, and satisfaction. This type of environment and culture was something that Jon experienced when he started working at MCDHH.

In 1991 Jon started working at MCDHH as a hard of hearing specialist in the case management division. Jon has held various job titles at MCDHH through-out the years, but when he read the job description for his current position as Assistive Technology Manager/Training Specialist he said, “Hey this is me!” Currently Jon works with employees and employers, both within and outside of state government, to create accessible workplace environments which results in higher retention of these employees. When Jon assesses the type of accommodation the employee needs in her/his workspace, his mindset is to look at the employee’s capabilities first. Using this method not only helps him create a good work environment, but it also empowers the employee to think about her/his abilities. Additionally this reinforces the strengths to the employer. Jon shows me firsthand an example of how technology and putting forth his abilities has helped him in his own job.

Jon, along with many of the employees at MCDHH uses Video Relay Service (VRS) to communicate with people on his computer at work. Jon initiates a call by dialing the VRS operator, then gives the operator, when he/she appears onscreen, the number he would like to call. The operator dials the number and then interprets between what Jon is signing and what the other person is speaking in return.



Dialogue – Page 6

As I tour the rest of Jon’s Department to me almost every aspect of the work environment has been made accessible. The conference room has an FM video monitor system so that meeting can occur both in speech and in sign language through VRS. There are multiple Assistive Listening Devices (ALD) throughout the room. All of the staff at MCDHH know American Sign Language, and some like Jon, also speak more than one spoken language. This environment represents the diversity of language that exists in the Commonwealth.

Success, Jon says, “It’s about the little things that go a long way.” Jon then tells me a story about when he recently visited with an agency in Brockton where an employee had lost her hearing and was struggling at work. Jon had brought his smartphone and was able to use remote CART services so that when he was doing the workplace assessment, the employee could understand everything he was saying by reading the verbatim transcribed text of Jon's comments on the screen of the smartphone. This allowed her to fully participate in the assessment, something she could otherwise not have done. She was ecstatic to learn how adaptive equipment will allow her to increase productivity at her job. The key is always to find an accommodation that works for the specific individual in question. As the Commonwealth embraces adaptive technology, Jon continues to love his job because, as he says, “it continues to teach me at least as much as I teach others.”



Figure 2: Image of Jonathan O'Dell on his VRS





Figure 3: Carl Richardson at his desk

In Carl's position as the State House ADA Coordinator, he has felt welcomed even before starting his job. Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB) offered Carl with a pre-employment orientation and mobility (O and M) training. MCB's O and M instructor met with Carl prior to the start of his job and worked with him so that he would be both able to be comfortable with the surroundings and navigate the State House safely. MCB also came to his office and did a site evaluation to make recommendations on any assistive technology he needed to do his job successfully.

In 2007 Carl started working in his current position. Similar to Jon, Carl also works daily on improving accessibility for people. The only difference is that Carl works on making the State House more accessible for the public, as most ADA Coordinators work on creating accessible environments for employees. Carl's work consists of improving structural, programmatic, and procedural changes within the State House. This impact can be seen on the State House website by viewing the accessible links, repairing wheelchair lifts, and having accessible programming for State House events. While I am at Carl's office he receives a phone call from another State House employee. He asks her about changes she has seen over her 30 year tenure at the State House. I can hear her from the other end of the phone say, "the culture it has become much more welcoming and open to people with disabilities." Together we walk towards one of the hearing rooms that highlight this shift in culture.

"Assistive Listening Devices Available" reads a sign right outside the hearing room we are about to enter. As a 216 year old building the Massachusetts State House, which is likely the most important historical landmarks of the state, has clearly transformed with the current culture in creating an environment that includes accessibility for all. Inside the hearing room three large LCD monitors surround the room.



Dialogue – Page 8

These monitors can provide close captioning when a hearing is in session. In addition to the monitors the room is equipped with ALD devices and an induction coil loop system in the floor so that anyone wearing a hearing aid can amplify the sound by the flick of a switch on her/his hearing aid. The State House has state of the art adaptive technology that is not only impressive, it is avant garde. To reiterate my point as we are standing in the hearing room, Carl receives a call from a woman at a nearby museum to ask him if he could meet with her to discuss the type of accessibility that exists at the State House. Reaffirming Oliver Wendell Holmes when he wrote in *The Atlantic* in 1858, “The Boston State-House is the hub of the solar system.” Since its inception the Massachusetts State House strove to be a place open to all citizens of the commonwealth, and in present day understands that creating a completely accessible environment is one essential factor in achieving this goal.

This is one primary reason Carl enjoys his job. Carl furthers his affinity towards his job as he recounts a story from earlier this spring. On April 3rd for Deaf Blind awareness day, Carl received a call informing him that in honor of this day 15 deaf and blind people wanted to meet with their legislators. He got 26 interpreters for each person and every single person was able to meet with their legislator. This was huge! On days like this Carl says, “I feel this is the coolest job in the world! Not only because everyone was able to come to the State House, but because they will come back.”

Both Carl and Jon feel strongly that they were both hired because of their skill set and background with this type of work, not because they have a disability. Additionally they both bring a unique experience of being able to focus on people’s abilities to be able to experience life at its fullest. Carl and Jon blend their personal experiences to improve their work productivity. This type of work environment has been acknowledged and supported from the top down. Walking into a welcoming environment changes the entire culture of the workplace. Living in a state where the Governor places strong emphasis on being a Model Employer has made all the difference. They stay because they have been given the voice and the power to create real change for all people with disabilities and after meeting with both of them; I have the strong sense that will be here until everyone has the same access to accommodations as themselves. They have proven, as long as they are at the helm, that day is coming soon.

If you would like to explore receiving an accommodation in your workplace please click on this link to the [Massachusetts Office on Disability](#) and click on State Agency ADA Coordinator list



The Commonwealth: Working to be a Model Employer



RACRA FUND

The Office of Access and Opportunity and the Massachusetts Office on Disability administer the RACRA funds and there are still funds available if you need to access them in order to provide a reasonable accommodation for a member of your staff.

RACRA funding is designed to assist executive branch agencies in their efforts to reasonably accommodate employees with disabilities when agency funding is an issue. Awards from RACRA do not supplant existing agency responsibilities to respond to reasonable accommodations, but are intended to be a back stop when and where an agency finds that it cannot meet the marginal cost(s) of providing such reasonable accommodations. Time is running out as we approach the end of our fiscal year.

ADA Coordinators, if you have reasonable accommodations that fit the RACRA criteria, please submit them to: Myra Berloff, Director of the Massachusetts Office on Disability, One Ashburton Place, 13th Floor, Boston, MA 02108.

You may access the RACA application by clicking on the link below:
[MOD RACRA Application](#)



ARE WE MAKING PROGRESS?

Chart 1:

The percentage of self-identified Executive Branch employees hit 3% in June 2013, which has remained constant through March of 2014.

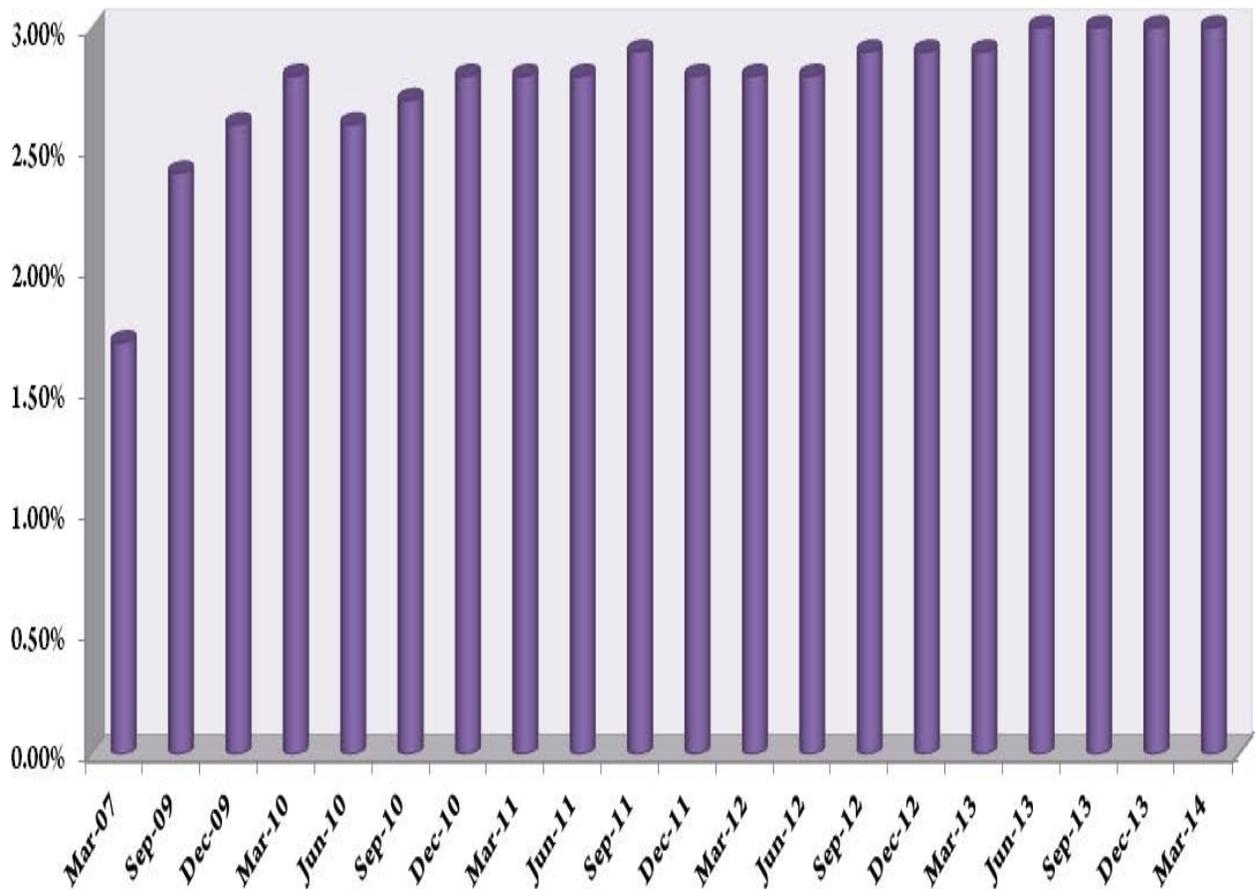
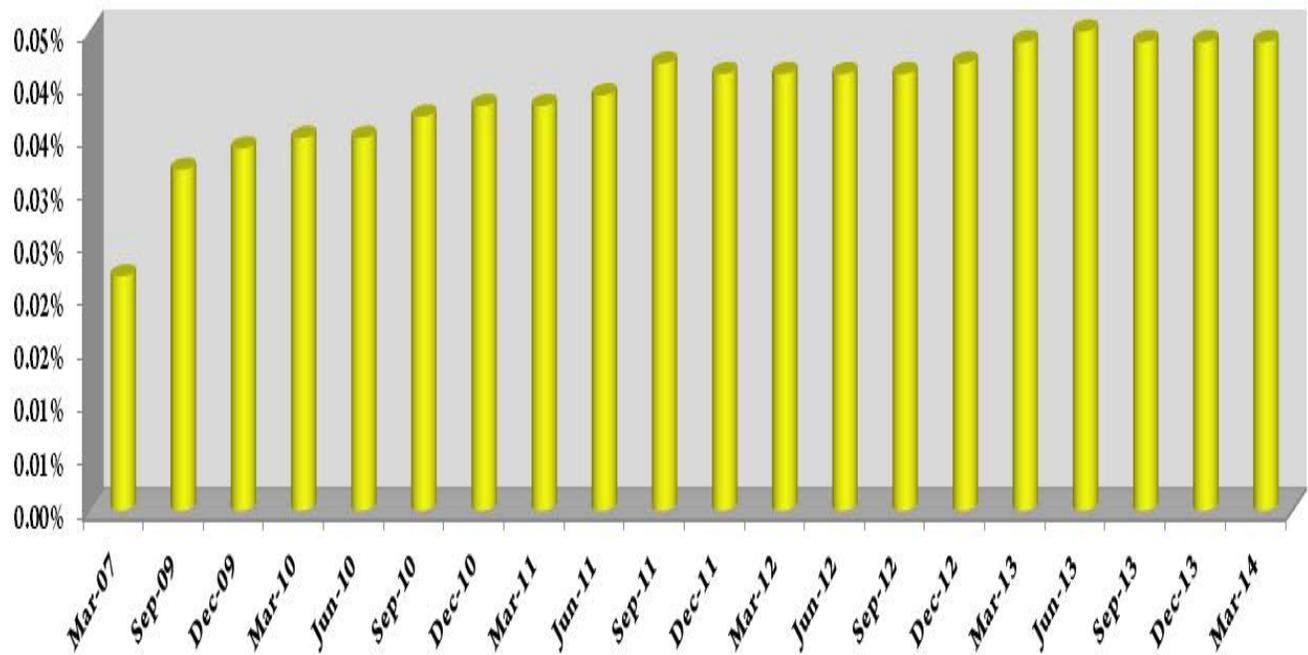


Chart 2:

The Percentage of Self-Identified Executive Branch Management Employees from March 2007 to March 2014.

The percentage of self-identified Executive Branch Management employees hit a mark of 4.5% in June 2013, in comparison to the 2.2% reported in March 2007. Percentages have increased steadily; 3.4% in December 2009, 3.7% in September 2010, 3.9% in June 2011, 4.2% in December 2012, and 4.4% in March 2014.



Pie Chart 1:

The Percentage of Self-Identified Executive Branch Managers and Employees by EEO-4 Category as of close of Quarter 4, FY13.

The categories and percentages are as follow: Professional 61%, Management 13%, Office/Clerical 13%, Service Maintenance 3%, Technician 3% and other 7% (**note:** other positions include Protected Service Positions (sworn and non-sworn) and Skilled Craft Position)

Self-Identified Executive Branch Managers & Employees by EEO-4 Job Categories as of close of Q3/FY14

■ Management ■ Professional ■ Technician ■ Office/Clerical ■ Service Maintenance ■ Other

