



**UNIVERSITY OF  
SOUTH CAROLINA**  
**COMMUNITY INTEGRATION PROJECT**  
**Focus Group Findings – May 2012**

South Carolina SHARE

As part of a larger study, we conducted eight different focus groups with individuals using mental health and/or housing services around Columbia, SC. We talked about mental health consumers’ social and community experiences, preferences, recommendations for useful services and resources, and ideas for improving community activities. We hope this information can be helpful in guiding services, particularly in finding ways to provide more opportunities for community engagement and social activity. We are also using the information to create a Community Resource & Welcome Guide to assist people moving into new housing and/or seeking out new ways to participate in their communities. Below we provide the demographic characteristics of participants across all eight focus groups, which had 45 participants total.

**DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF ALL PARTICIPANTS**

<b>GENDER</b>	53% male	47% female
<b>AGE</b>	Range: 20-67 years	Average: 50 years
<b>RACE/ETHNICITY</b>	Race: 47% Black 49% White 4% Other	Ethnicity: 5% Latino
<b>EDUCATION</b>	40% High-school diploma or less 53% Some college or 2-yr degree 7% 4-yr degree or higher	
<b>MARTIAL STATUS</b>	68% Never married 22% Divorced 5% Married	2.5% Separated 2.5% Widowed
<b>EMPLOYMENT</b>	89% Unemployed 11% Employed	Average hours/week: 14.5
<b>RESIDENCE</b>	48% Apartment 26% House	14% Homeless or shelter 12% Residential care or group home
<b>YRS IN COLUMBIA</b>	Average: 18 years	
<b>MOVES IN COLUMBIA</b>	Average: 4 times within Columbia	
<b>PAST HOMELESSNESS</b>	38% Yes	62% No
<b>ACCESS TO CAR</b>	33% Yes	67% No
<b>SERVICES USED</b>	Mental Health: 78% Yes 22% No Supported Housing: 36% Yes 64% No Section 8 Voucher: 2% Yes 98% No	Clubhouse/Day center: 27% Yes 73% No Peer support: 16% Yes 84% No

**Method:** Participants were asked questions about (1) their favorite activities, (2) preferences for doing activities with others or alone, (3) experiences in Columbia that were particularly welcoming or unwelcoming, (4) resources and services that were helpful with housing or activities, and (5) obstacles they’ve faced in finding housing or doing activities. Summaries of the themes discussed in the focus group at *your specific site* are below.

## SC SHARE PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

<b>ACTIVITIES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Participants discussed doing <b>activities related to mental health</b> (STAR mentoring, advocacy, NAMI groups) as well as <b>non-mental health activities</b> (exercising, working, art/crafts, church) in the community.</li> <li>▪ Activities were identified as important ways to <b>positively impact others, avoid depression, keep connected to humanity, and help take care of oneself.</b></li> </ul>
<b>SOCIAL LIFE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Participants expressed the desire to be more social.</li> <li>▪ However, a major challenge to doing activities with others was having different morals and values, such as drugs/alcohol, than other community members.</li> </ul>
<b>COMMUNITY LIFE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Participants reported feeling <b>accepted in many mental health-related settings</b>, such as SC SHARE and NAMI, as well as other settings, like church recovery groups and day centers. These were places where others <b>knew about their mental health status and participants did not feel stigmatized.</b> They were also settings where participants could <b>improve their education</b> (e.g., peer mentor certification) and had <b>opportunities to work</b>, and where they felt <b>valued as functioning members</b> of society.</li> <li>▪ The group also discussed experiences of <b>being picked on or shunned</b> for having a mental illness.</li> </ul>
<b>RESOURCES &amp; SERVICES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Participants seemed <b>knowledgeable about housing resources</b> available in Columbia, including through MIRCI, the Housing Authority, and other agencies.</li> <li>▪ The group listed many <b>resources for finding new activities</b>, such as newspapers, library, colleges, and other programs through churches and community centers. They also identified a number of <b>resources for food, homeless services, and employment</b>, including faith-based organizations (Christ Central, Cooperative Ministry, His House) and others (vocational rehabilitation).</li> <li>▪ They also discussed <b>mental health-related resources</b>, such as SC SHARE’s WRAP program for crisis planning and specific facilities for inpatient hospitalizations.</li> </ul>
<b>BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Individuals identified <b>problems with finances and stigma around mental illness</b> (dog adoption, job interviews, health insurance) as the largest barriers to community activities.</li> </ul>

Compared to our other focus groups, SC SHARE participants more extensively discussed activities which they initiated on their own, rather than those organized by mental health service agencies. They also discussed more work and volunteer activities, such as advocacy and peer mentoring. Furthermore, they were more familiar with a wide range of community resources, such as those available through local colleges and community centers than other groups. SC SHARE participants also expressed more directly stigmatizing experiences than did other participants. In general, these individuals seemed to have higher levels of personal agency and control over their own choices than others, while still identifying mental health services (e.g., WRAP program) as valuable supports.

Altogether these findings reflect both the interest participants have in community activities as well as the obstacles they often face in pursuing such activities. Many expressed an appreciation for SC SHARE and other social settings as places where they felt accepted; however, taking advantage of multiple opportunities for social and community involvement beyond mental health-specific settings has clearly benefited these consumers. Overall, these findings argue for the importance of finding strategies to tackle obstacles such as inadequate finances and community stigma, and increasing the outreach of SC SHARE’s valuable recovery resources to other consumers in the Columbia area and beyond.

For more information: [www.SCSHARE.com](http://www.SCSHARE.com) or (803) 739-5712.