

The Coalition of Mental Health Consumer Organizations (COMHCO)

COMHCO is New Jersey's Statewide Consumer Membership Organization. The main purpose is to provide consumers with necessary education about personal and system wide options to enhance the lives of the members and the multitude of others across NJ. Through empowerment and advocacy training at monthly meetings and annual conference, COMHCO members are able to bring voice to the concerns and problems that those suffering mental illness face daily. They also work to raise awareness of the issues that affect mental health consumers by sitting on local, state, and national advisory boards, committees, and councils.

It is wonderful to see how excited consumers can be when given the chance to raise their voice and see the effect that their input has in creating positive change not only in their own lives, but also in the opinions of policy makers and state officials. Since COMHCO's humble beginnings at an off season camp site in Central NJ in 1986, COMHCO has grown to represent a membership of over 4,000 individuals and includes consumers at all levels of recovery from members of NJ's State Hospitals and Self Help Centers to consumers living in the community, and also to those who are now working within the system today to ensure a better life for all.

The monthly board and membership meetings allow for the free exchange of ideas and concerns by consumers about the system they live. Meeting topics range from upcoming legislation, media portrayal, education, and other current topics. Our meetings also provide a unique forum for NJ officials to directly speak with consumers; this has allowed for much innovation during advisory sessions by opening the doors between the Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services and their future clients. These forums have allowed consumers and officials to see positive changes in the Mental Health delivery system by allowing service providers to hear firsthand about the needs, concerns, and directions that consumers see as aiding the system.

The premiere event each year is the Annual New Jersey Consumer Conference. The dedication of members to sharing their experiences and the knowledge they obtained is clear to see by 250 consumers that attended a total of 21 workshops. This conference provides an opportunity for consumers to spend a single Saturday, attending workshops on current issues, while gaining essential skills necessary to help in their wellness and recovery process as well as offering materials to be shared with their fellow consumers. The value of this conference is reflected not only in the attendance and participation in the event, but by the support received from the county mental health boards, mental health agencies, and state psychiatric hospitals. COMHCO also provides an e-mail alert system that allows for the quick dispersal of important and timely materials as well as meeting announcements and information on state and federal issues concerning mental health.