Final Consulting Report

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I. About the Organization

Organization

The Mental Health Association of Allegheny County is an advocacy organization, located in the Hill District at 1945 Fifth Avenue. They are devoted to providing direct legal support and also educating the public to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health disorders. Their mission is:

> *To be a leader, providing education, advocacy, legal and outreach services in collaboration with those affected by mental illness and/or substance use disorders.*

Facilities

The MHAAC share a large office building with the center for the deaf. The space MHAAC has rented is small considering the staff size, but it is contiguous. The space is adequate however because most staff members spend a lot of time on the road directly advocating for their clients. Most administrative work does occur in the office, and there is room to hold the regular staff meetings. There is also the option of renting more space in the building if the organization requires it.

Programs

As stated in the MHAAC literature:

Child/Adolescent Advocacy - The Child/Adolescent Advocates work closely with families who have children with emotional/behavioral disorders. The assist parents in getting the necessary educational services that are both appropriate and culturally sensitive. Workshops are also offered for parents, professionals, faculties and school districts on education advocacy and developing parent/professional partnerships that address using positive approaches to challenging behaviors.

Community Advocacy - the Community Advocates offer individual advocacy and information and referral resources to those individuals who have been discharged from an inpatient treatment center or who are receiving outpatient treatment and services and need assistance in negotiating the behavioral health system. The Community Advocates also help those who need information on how to begin receiving appropriate services for themselves or a loved one.

Community Outreach - The Community Outreach Coordinator works with members of the African-American and Latino communities to share information and resources about mental illness and emotional/behavioral disorders. This is done through collaboration with community-based organizations, faith-based institutions, health fairs and other partner agencies.

Legal Services - The attorney provides legal advice, consultation and representation to individuals who are receiving services from the public mental health system.

Patient Advocacy - The Patient Advocates work as liaisons between patients at Mayview State Hospital, the hospital, family members, and the behavioral health system. They inform patients of the resources available to them, help to familiarize them with the hospital, and help to resolve any problems or concerns that arise during their course of care.

Public Education - The Public Education Program works with mental health and/or other disability related and human service organizations, mental health and substance use professionals, and other interested individuals to help raise the awareness of mental illness and substance use. The Public Education Program advocates for increased and improved services for those affected by a mental illness and/or an substance use disorder; coordinates educational workshops for individuals affected by a mental illness, addictive disease or other disabilities.

The Western Region Empowerment Project is a project of the Mental Health Association of Allegheny County and its mission is to strengthen the consumer voice in advocacy and empowerment through Drop-In Centers and other consumer groups throughout the Western Region of Pennsylvania by teaching the skills needed for those in recovery to become leaders and advocates.

Staff

There were twelve staff members as well as a part time technology consultant. The Executive Director is Brenda Lee; she started working for the organization as a fund raiser sixteen years ago. She was the accidental techie until Nick, was put on the payroll as a technology consultant.

Nick Callas primarily focuses on maintaining the server and various software packages. He works for the MHAAC and the Center for the Deaf, which is located in the same building, so he is often available for quick questions or problems. He has been with the organization for several years and is familiar with their strengths and abilities. Nick has the skills and ability to expand MHAAC's technology potential, however his limited time makes it difficult to expand his duties beyond a maintenance role. He is a rich resource for verifying the feasibility of various projects however.

Phil Dutch was the Resource Manager, which is responsible for organizing MHAAC's library of reference materials on Mental Health, as well as directing incoming calls. Because website is another information resource the Resource Manager be the primary web developer and will also be responsible for maintaining the site.

Technical Environment

The MHAAC has seven laptops each with a wireless cards, three desktops, two trios and a palm. The hardware is up to date, and has all been purchased in the past three years. The prevalence of mobile devices allow there to be an active information flow between staff despite their limited time in the office. The organization runs Microsoft Windows XP with Office on all machines and also uses the portal Share Point to announce meetings. Share Point can also be used for file sharing and staff members are encouraged to keep all vital files on the server, however in practice this is rarely done. The office has a DSL connection which is shared between the web server and all computers in the office. There are wired connections for the desktops as well as wireless connections for the laptops. There is also a lan accessible printer, and three personal printers. Phones and a fax machine are also available.

Technical Management

Brenda has basic computer skills and served as the accidental techie in the past. To free up more of her time and to increase the organization's technical capabilities she hired the consultant to take care of day to day technology problems such as upgrading or troubleshooting crashed machines. However, Brenda is still responsible for determining technology planning and spending.

Nick supports the MHAAC for a flat monthly fee. He created the current web site, but passed it to Brenda for maintenance.

Technology Planning

A comprehensive technology plan was contracted for several years ago, and that plan is largely responsible for the cohesive state of the current technology. The plan was not updated, however, and purchases became ad-hoc.

Internal and External Communication

Files can be shared through the Share Point server, but it is generally only used for announcements, which Brenda posts once a week. The file sharing needs that occur within the organization are minimal, and can easily be accomplished through the Share Point software. Brenda and Nick developed a specialized Access Database to track client phone calls, however it is not widely used despite a comprehensive training program.

The web site had only been updated twice in the past six months and has many broken links. The result was a site which was out of date and difficult to navigate. The design was also several years old, which makes it less visually appealing.

Most communication, both internal and external is accomplished through email, the newsletter, and face to face interactions. These methods are limited, however, in the number of people they can reach due to time and cost issues.

Information Management

A complicated Access Database exists to manage client information, however it is not widely used.

II. Scope of Work

Task 1. Improve External Communication

MHAAC's mission includes educating people about mental illness. This was accomplished primarily with pamphlets distributed at local health fairs, to people in the prison or public health system and through a poorly maintained website. One problem is that the pamphlets only reaches a small percentage of the population partly because health fairs are not widely attended, but also because there is a stigma surrounding mental health. The stigma makes people less likely to publicly request information, and thus even those at a fair may pass by MHAAC's booth.

Information on the website was hard to find, and not professionally presented, and therefore not easily accessible. By developing a comprehensive and professional website as well as a sustainable process for updating it, visitors would have a way to find up-to-date information anonymously.

The MHAAC member base gives the organization authority when advocating for mental heath rights. It is therefore important to provide an incentive for people to become members. Currently there is a newsletter mailed out four times a year, which is the main benefit of membership. A "member's only" section on the website could provide a less expensive way of distributing the newsletter and a more active communication channel with members. Visitors could also apply for membership on line, thus allowing those who don't attend events to show their support.

Approach

The plan was to build a website either using PHP, CSS, and JavaScript or a content management tool either of which will allow for a robust, yet easily updated website. Phil would work with Brenda and the consultant to build and design the webpages as well at to write a website manual. The manual, comments in the code of the page would work to help make the site sustainable even after Phil has left the organization. To further increase sustainability it is suggested that Phil directly train his successor, or at least another member of the staff. Brenda and the consultant will also develop a system for bringing new content to the website, such as upcoming event information.

Expected Outcomes

The primary goals are to increase information availably and membership. With a well designed website the number of hits to the website in general should increase, and membership should grow if the site is properly advertised. To keep relevant information on the website new content needs to regularly be supplied from inside the MHAAC. Someone within the MHAAC also needs to have the necessarily skills to update the site with the new content for the website to stay relevant. Thus looking at page hits and membership count are direct ways of measuring the web site's effectiveness. While measuring how often new content is provided for the site, and what mechanisms are in place for preserving knowledge on how to maintain the site are indirect, but more crucial measurements.

Additional Impacts

Providing content for the website will require many staff members to create additional write ups and announcements in a timely fashion. This will put more strain on them and may cut into other duties. Brenda will have the additional duty of approving all web content. The content will also provide job accountability and may make the staff more aware of internal projects. Putting timely and accurate information on the Internet in an accessible way may also increase the attendance at MAAC events, as well as the number of people using their services.

Task 2. Improve Technology Planning

At the beginning of the consulting period there was no innovatory of equipment or software, nor any plan for future technology developments. While creating a technology plan was not an initial consulting goal the need to develop a cohesive and on-going plan slowly became obvious.

A technology plan allows an organization to budget for upcoming expenses, reduces unnecessary costs and last minute purchases, and allows for more effective use of existing technology. It also can be used as a tool to gain funding for technology development. In this way a technology plan allows the MHAAC to use their time, money, and technology to support their programs in the most effective way.

Approach

The plan was to provide Brenda with relevant information on how to create a technology plan, and then to assist in the planning process. Brenda would then determine the best method of creating the plan and the consultant would provide feedback as to the plan's feasibility as necessary.

Expected Outcomes

The primary goal is to generate a procedure for creating technology plans in the future.

Additional Impacts

Creating a technology plan will require time both in writing the actual technology plan as well as when doing a technology inventory.

III. Outcomes and Recommendations

Task 1. Improving External Communication

Phil, the resource manager, created a simple, yet elegant, new website. He created several complicated web pages and a manual for updating the site with little help. After looking at HTML cheat sheets and tutorials he independently created a static page with tables, images, and several links. He also incorporated a pre-written Javascript based password verification scheme into the basic site, only needing a single hint. After going through several Front Page tutorials on his own he created the template page with guidance from the consultant. Phil used the template to create a log in, and members only page and incorporated the Javascript password verification all without external help.

The member's only section makes it clear that MHAAC is a membership organization, and provides a clear benefit of membership. In the past the main benefit of membership has been a newsletter, which is printed and mailed. By putting the newsletter online the benefits of membership are more immediate and also less expensive for the organization. Increasing membership is vital to MHAAC's mission, because with a greater constituency they have more clout in advocacy situations. The new member's only page has not yet gone live, so it is yet to be seen what impact this section has on membership numbers.

To make the project more sustainable Phil has been creating a manual which contains the information necessary to understand how to update the site. He wrote the parts of the document corresponding to basic HTML tags and basic Front Page utility. The document includes screen shots, detailed explanations, possible problems, and tips for debugging. The intended purpose of the manual is to both serve as a reference to the regular website maintainer, and also to serve as a guide in case the site has to be updated when Phil is unavailable. It will also make it easier to train Phil's replacement when the time comes. To ensure that the manual reaches its full potential it is recommended that it be expanded to include information about the templates, the Javascript login script, the website structure, and also be updated and changed as the skills needed to update the website change through time.

Previously Brenda was responsible for updating the organization's website. She was also the only on in the organization besides Nick who had a clear idea of the web site's structure and how to update it. Due to limited time and large numbers of responsibilities this situation led to infrequent updates and occasional broken links. Now that control of the website has been transferred to Phil and the manual makes it possible for others to update the site at need updates cost Brenda only the time it requires to approve the changes. This means that she can devote her time to other aspects of running the organization and meeting the mission while still having an actively updated website.

Phil has left the organization, and thus a large threat to sustainability has been created due to the incompleteness of the manual. Brenda is very committed to the website however and will be maintaining the site until a replacement can be hired. To offset the loss of Phil's expertise the consultant wrote a brief manual that describes the relevant details of the new website. The website would be more sustainable if this manual was extended to include more information about Front Page and other general information about web editing. By expanding the manual and keeping it up to date maintenance of the website can easily be transferred.

There is also much more than can be done with the website such as taking membership dues on line through pay-pall, re-writing a lot of the content, and placing the current newsletter online. The skill base to accomplish those tasks now exists, however if the manual is not completed soon some of the knowledge may be forgotten or lost. Also if visible changes are not made to the main site soon enthusiasm may wane among the staff, which will make it harder to extract fresh content from them.

Through the research and planning stages of the website design many new ideas were generated about what could be done with the website. A staff meeting was held early in the partnership where all staff members were allowed to discuss what they enjoyed in a website. This gave the staff an ownership of the site and a willingness to suggest possible uses and expansions. Ideas such as a book club, forums, and the ability for site visitors to submit personal stories were generated by the staff and met with a lot of enthusiasm. This shows an new vision for how technology can be used within the organization, though it isn't clear yet how many of these ideas will be implemented.

Task 2. Improving Technology Planning

Brenda is bridling this enthusiasm to create a technology plan. She has developed a time line for creating the plan and has gone through several documents explaining how to create a technology plan. She also has a template and the outdated technology plan of the MHAAC to work from. The old technology plan was allowed to fall out of date, however it was carefully followed and the importance of a technology plan is well understood within the organization. Now that the mechanisms for creating and updating a technology plan have been explained the plan should be sustainable. There is a risk however that some information concerning the process of creating the document is still missing. This can't be determined until further along in the creation process, however if this does become a problem techsoup.org has several excellent articles about creating technology plans. It may also be beneficial to speak to peer organizations or to Nick, the outside technology consultant, to determine how the obstacles can be overcome.

Additional Recommendations

Forums

Forums would allow users to provide each other with support and information in a quick and anonymous way. Providing a place to collect information would support MHAAC's mission to be a leader providing educational information about mental health. It may also encourage people to visit the site more frequently, due to the frequently changing content, and therefore possibly find out about more events and even become involved enough to become members.

The possible downsides of incorporating forums could be legal repercussions, staff time spent moderating the boards, increased server traffic, and the possibility for the forums to be used by those of ill intent to discourage other visitors. Other sites containing sensitive material have overcome these issues however. For example http://www.psychforums.com/ has a very active forum on mental health and other abuse.

A forum can be incorporated in several ways:

A simple solution is to use a third party forum hosting like http://www.forumsplace.com/. This allows a forum to be incorporated with very minimal effort or upkeep. It does however require visitors to create their own user name and password pair for the forum as distinct from the rest of the site. It also means that the data posted will only be as private as the forum host decides to keep it, which may not be considered acceptable considering the stigma surrounding mental health.

Another solution which doesn't require large amounts of technical skill is to keep looking for a good, inexpensive, CMS which can run on a Windows server. If you don't want to use the CMS for the entire site it could still be used just for the forum section of the site. CMSmatrix.org is a good site for comparing various CMSs. Opensourcecms.com will also let you demo some Open Source CMSs.

The final solution which would be appropriate for MHAAC is to develop a forum in house. A forum can be built using php in combination with a server, however it is not a simple process and would therefore that a fair amount of time – probably on the order of a month or two to have completely up and tested if it is being written from scratch. Finding some sample code online may help speed up that process, but then it makes upkeep more difficult.

User Input

A simpler, and probably more appropriate use of the site given the current personnel and site usage is to incorporate other types of user input. Providing a way for users to submit content would allow more information to be disseminated and also provide a sense of community, and therefore a stronger impetus to become a member. The staff of MHAAC have a limited set of personal experience, and have legal and moral limits concerning what can be said about clients' cases. This means that it is not possible for the staff to provide the same breath of experience that exists among visitors to the web site or even amount the membership of the organization. By providing an easy mechanism for uses to submit content this breath of experience can be shared and may help others coping with similar issues, and would provide more information about mental illness.

It would be simple to allow users to submit personal experiences with various diseases. To start with a link could be placed on the bottom of the page with an email address to send stories to. If a more professional look is to have a form on the site where visitors can enter their stories and that could automatically send the email. The later approach also has the advantage of only being plain text. If a lot of e-mails including complicated attachments such as .docs came in there may be incompatibility issues, or worse viruses could be transmitted.

A similar approach could be used to allow users to submit articles for the newsletter or to provide a simple online method to sign up for events. If the web event sign up gets a reasonable amount of traffic then creating a closer interface between the event database and the web site could save significant time. This would be a significant project however and would likely require serious help from Nick, or possibly even a outside source.