Handout 4: Issues Facing People With a Mental Illness/Disability

Unlike people with a physical illness, people with a mental illness usually do not evoke community concern and sympathy. As well, the community has not always recognised the needs of people with a mental illness/disability, or their right to lead independent lives.

Key issues that people with a mental illness/disability have to face include:

**Stigma**

This means a label of disgrace or shame which affects not only society's view of an individual, but that individual's self-esteem and confidence, relationships and social life. Stigma is a major barrier to the full and equal participation in society, both economically and socially. People with a mental illness and their carers experience substantial stigma, which results in stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, marginalisation and restriction or denial of their rights.

**Discrimination**

People with a mental illness also experience discrimination in many areas of living. This includes denial of access to institutions (such as education), and inferior treatment by service providers across a range of facilities. Discrimination is also reflected in the lower provision of services for people with a mental illness when compared to those for people with a physical illness.

**Housing**

People with a mental illness find it extremely difficult to access adequate accommodation. Sometimes this is because they are unable to work because of their illness and are consequently on a low income such as some form of benefit. Mostly, the problem is due to community prejudice and discrimination. Private accommodation providers are often reluctant to let accommodation to people with a mental illness because of mostly unfounded fears they will 'cause a disturbance' or they won't pay the rent. Some people with a mental illness end up homeless, particularly aging, chronically mentally ill people.

**Unemployment**

Employment in the open labour market benefits people with a mental illness/psychiatric disability in a number of ways: economic independence, self-esteem, and opportunities for social interaction. However, people with a mental illness face a number of barriers when looking for work: attitudes of potential employers and colleagues, the impact of the particular mental illness and treatment on their capacity to work, and limited access to employment training programs. Lack of suitable employment opportunities for people with a mental illness increases their risk of poverty and homelessness.