



**ACT Town Hall #3: Reconceptualizing the Delivery of ACT in Our Challenging
Environment
June, July, and August 2020**

ACT Institute

Center for Practice Innovations at Columbia University Department of Psychiatry &
New York State Psychiatric Institute

ACT Town Hall #3: Reconceptualizing the Delivery of ACT in Our Challenging Environment

The third Town Hall was held on August 11, 2020 from 11:00 AM to 12:30 PM. It was facilitated by ACT Institute staff members Dr. Helle Thorning, Pascale Jean-Noel, Luis Lopez, with the participation of ACT Institute Dr. David Lowenthal, Krystal Ayala, Abaigael Duke, Noah Lipton, Gary Scannevin, and MSW Interns Jenny Ariza-Umaña and Joshua Binag. ACT providers that were present during the third Town Hall came from ACT teams in the New York City (19), Hudson River (5), Western (1) and Central (1) New York regions. Like the previous Town Halls, the third Town Hall was hosted virtually using Adobe Connect, a digital platform where individuals could participate and interact with one another via computer audio, dial-in phone number, or in the participant chat box. The facilitators also used poll questions and short answer polls on the platform to help facilitate the overall dialogue.

The purpose of the third Town Hall was to continue the discussion with ACT providers on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing unrest, and the wider dialogue around anti-Black racism, police brutality, and White supremacy on the ACT model of care, ACT providers, and ACT participants and their social supports. However, the third Town Hall was also an opportunity for ACT providers to discuss recommendations to their ACT teams, agencies, and governmental entities such as the NYS-OMH and New York City (NYC) Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) surrounding working safely and effectively in a COVID-19 environment and addressing anti-Black racism and White supremacy in their work and organizations. The sections that follow will list the recommendations that ACT providers suggested during this Town Hall.

COVID-19

During the third Town Hall, the facilitators discussed issues related to community engagement, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and national dialogue around anti-Black racism. In relation to COVID-19, ACT providers shared feeling disconnected from their communities. One provider reflected on the disconnect, saying, “I definitely feel like less a part of my community than I was before COVID19 because I spend less actual time IN the community because the focus is to limit our exposure and practice social distancing.” ACT providers also mentioned that many agencies working remotely, alongside social distancing challenges and access to personal protective equipment (PPE), fueled these feelings of disconnect from the community during the COVID-19 lockdown.

ACT providers mentioned the importance of a proper at-home work environment. ACT providers mentioned the need for a quiet place at home to work as well as a solid work routine as they work from home. One ACT provider mentioned that their supervisor has been helping them take the necessary steps to establish a solid routine. This emphasizes the importance of team leadership in supporting their team members in the new remote working environment.

ACT providers also mentioned their desire to return to in-person visits within the community. One ACT provider discussed the challenges that they have had in engaging their ACT participants via telehealth. They mentioned, “I also struggle with the tele visits. It doesn't give you a great assessment and a lot of the clients don't engage as well over the phone...” Another ACT provider, who works as a Peer Specialist, shared that they worked best providing face-to-face services. With this desire to return to in-person services, ACT providers stressed the importance of having access to PPE while in the community. The previously mentioned Peer Specialist mentioned the need for masks, gloves, hand sanitizer, and proper safety protocols in order for them to continue to work effectively within the community.

Police brutality, anti-Black Racism, and White supremacy

During the third Town Hall, ACT providers continued to address their opinions on white supremacy, police brutality, and anti-black practices. Some ACT providers reported concerns for the lack of diversity on the ACT teams that they are members of. One ACT provider shared, “My team is not as diverse in either gender or racial/ethnic make-up as the population we serve, and as we would like. We have always been aware of this, however because we are a state agency the civil service rules are very limiting to whom we can hire.” Another ACT provider shared,

We have only white females on our ACT team and one male (the prescriber). We have a client who has been on the team long term and has stated to many providers at hospitals and ACT that he would prefer an African American male meet with[sic] him. The team knows the clients would benefit and prefer a more diverse staff but there just[sic] aren't those applicants when we are hiring as far as I know.

ACT providers are seeing the need for the ACT Teams to be representative of the communities they serve.

The conversation regarding police brutality continued. ACT providers shared their involvement with local police departments to help educate them on mental health disorders. An ACT provider shared their experience with local police departments stating, “We have had local police reach out to us for assistance in working with our clients in crisis. They have asked for our support more now whereas before it seemed like ACT had to reach out to them for assistance.” Another ACT provider shared,

In Nassau County, Cory Muraglio our LI Regional Advocate will be doing trainings for the Nassau County Police Department on Hearing Voices Training workshop! They will begin to feel what it may be like to have a Serious mental illness and then they will be

training the entire police department. This is a new initiative between OMH, OCA and Nassau County Police.

The need for a justice informed role in ACT Teams was shared by one ACT provider stating, “I was surprised when beginning on ACT that a justice informed member is not a more prominent role on ACT teams in general. I feel a barrier to us connecting to them is that we don't have that assigned role.”

ACT providers wanted a space that was similar to the Town Halls where they could discuss with their team members issues around racism and police brutality. ACT providers shared that they are unsure where to begin. “Though we have these discussions briefly throughout our work, it often gets rushed due to more urgent needs. I am trying to put together a day-long "retreat" for my team to discuss Racism and our what specific steps our team can take, but of course there are challenges with not being able to be in the same physical space, me having time to develop something[sic], etc. I am wondering if this is something the ACT Institute could assist with in your team training options?” was a comment shared by one ACT provider. Due to the flexibility and community based[sic] approach of ACT Teams, some providers have found it difficult to attend trainings and Town Halls provided by the ACT Institute. These ACT providers see the importance of these types of conversations, one provider shared “I think it is very important to bring it up in as many spaces as possible! For me, my team can't all attend those trainings so I want to also have a dedicated space specific to our team so all team members can participate.”

Recommendations

COVID-19

In response to COVID-19, ACT providers suggested that agencies provide staff with trainings on telehealth technologies due to the expansion of remote work and remote engagement with ACT participants. ACT providers also wanted their agencies to implement clear and consistent messaging, infection prevention measures, and training for trauma-informed therapy with their participants due to the mental distress that the COVID-19 pandemic caused. ACT providers emphasized the importance of team and organizational leadership to support their team members in a remote working environment. Lastly, with the transition back to in-person visits, ACT providers stressed the importance of having access to PPE (i.e. masks, gloves) while working in the community in tandem with hand sanitizer and proper safety protocols.

Anti-racism and Anti-Racist Practices

ACT providers shared the need for planned time to have discussions that revolve around White supremacy and police brutality in their agencies and with their team members. ACT providers also shared they would like to reach out to their local police departments to assist in trainings and conversations around individuals with mental health disorders. ACT providers wanted more resources that would help them facilitate these types of conversations in their personal life and with their ACT teams and participants. For example, ACT providers asked for resources such as a course covering American history and trainings covering empathy and active listening for individuals who have the power to make systemic change (i.e. policy). ACT providers also shared that they want diversity within the ACT teams that would be more representative of the communities they serve. Lastly ACT providers suggested adding a role to the team that would allow ACT teams to be more justice informed.