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**Engagement and Retention in  
Services among Formerly  
Homeless Adults with  
Co-Occurring Mental Illness  
and Substance Abuse:  
Voices from the Margins**

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*This qualitative study analyzed 72 interviews with 39 formerly homeless psychiatric consumers to develop a grounded theory model of engagement and retention in mental health and substance abuse services. Person-centered themes included severity of mental illness and substance abuse (the latter also conflicting with programmatic abstinence requirements). System-related themes inhibiting service use included program rules and restrictions and a lack of one-on-one therapy. Those promoting service use were acts of kindness by staff, pleasant surroundings, and the promise (or attainment) of independent housing. Implications of these findings are discussed in terms of integrating consumers' opinions about services to enhance treatment engagement and retention.*

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Engagement and retention, regarded as key factors in mental health recovery, remain among the greatest challenges confronting providers seeking to help the severely mentally ill (Blackwell, 1997; Brunette, Mueser, & Drake, 2004; Calsyn, Klinkenberg, Morse, et al., 2004; Laudet, Magura, Cleland, et al., 2003; Watkins, Shaner, & Sullivan, 1999). When such individuals have co-occurring substance use disorders, the odds of treatment dropout are even greater (Brunette et al., 2004; Minkoff, 2001). Perhaps hardest to reach and retain are homeless mentally ill adults, where trust-building is considered essential to

successful engagement (Rowe, Fisk, Frey, & Davidson, 2002). Given a pattern of cycling in and out of services before finally engaging (Hopper, Jost, Hay, Welber, & Haugland, 1997; Watkins et al., 1999), it is important to understand consumers' views on the services designed to help them.

In this report, we focus on engagement and retention in mental health and substance abuse treatment services using qualitative interviews with 39 formerly homeless mentally ill persons who participated in the New York Services Study (NYSS). In keeping with an inductive perspective (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we used grounded the-