



Peer Leadership – Lived Experience Strengthens Supports



Peer Support Advocate Miriam Jones in the HCRS peer-led Life Enrichment Center

One Agency's Experience with Peer Support

At HCRS, in southeastern Vermont, peer support advocates receive special training on topics such as Intentional Peer Support, Alternatives to Suicide, and Hearing Voices, just to name a few. They train colleagues in how best to work with those individuals they are supporting. They are part of many agency leadership and decision-making teams and are regularly consulted about agency policies and procedures. They also frequently present at statewide conferences and testify to the legislature.

Individuals receiving services through any of their divisions, as well as community members across southeastern Vermont, may access Peer Support Services at HCRS. Various groups are provided, including hearing voices, as well as the development of one-on-one relationships. To learn more about Peer Support Services at HCRS, email peersupport@hcrs.org.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

Lived experience comes from living as a member of a minority or oppressed group. People who have lived with mental health, developmental disabilities and/or substance use disorders know first-hand about the challenges and what supports make a difference. VCP agencies are strengthened by the contributions of people with lived experience in critical leadership roles and in providing direct support to peers.

Peer support services, which are offered at many of VCP network agencies, provide an additional source of connection for a person going through a difficult time. Peer Support Team members have all navigated social service systems and are familiar with the marginalization that people who are psychiatrically labeled and people who use substances, because they have been in their shoes. Peer support programs are instrumental in bringing about improvements in programs and services. They help to reduce prejudice and discrimination, bring about key changes to mental health policies and practices, and increase knowledge of how to support people.

PEERS LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION TAKES MANY FORMS

- Residential and housing supports
- Mental health crisis response, case management and crisis bed support
- "Warm" phone response line for support
- Consultation to families in crisis
- Peer mentoring for people transitioning back into the community
- Outreach to students with I/DD transitioning to adult services
- Staffing wellness centers and day programs for people in recovery
- Training on Mental Health First Aid and Intentional Peer Support
- Participation in ethics teams and clinical standards reviews
- Serving as community living coaches
- Participation on medication delivery teams
- Youth promoting safe and healthy social, physical and mental wellness through movement and activity
- Peer support for maternal mental health