

GRAYS HARBOR COUNTY JAIL SYSTEM OF CARE

NEWSLETTER, AUGUST 2021

The Role of Peers in the Criminal Justice Setting

As part of the design of the System of Care (SOC) in the County Jail we intentionally sought to incorporate certified peer counselors and/or substance use disorder professionals in order to utilize their lived experience to help us build a successful model. Peers have a unique ability to diffuse the power dynamic that typically occurs in the jail setting, and are better positioned to help individuals establish recovery goals.

The term recovery can be defined as “a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential” (SAMHSA, 2012). Peer support is a highly effective way of encouraging the recovery of individuals with behavioral health challenges who are involved in the criminal justice system.

Peer support provides a unique and sometimes more impactful way to offer help based on shared understanding, and can allow for mutual empowerment. The belief that recovery is possible for individuals with behavioral health challenges is fundamental to this practice, as is the concept of developing a mutually beneficial relationship between individuals with similar life experiences. Individuals who have faced mental illness, substance use disorders, and trauma have a unique capacity to support each other.

While many people may achieve sobriety in jail through lack of access, this may have little effect on their actual recovery. The experience of incarceration impacts an individual’s life in a variety of ways and it is best understood, processed, and navigated by those who have lived it.

Individuals completing their sentences and transitioning from incarceration to the community often face significant challenges that can impede their ability to focus on recovery. Peer support is an important component of reducing relapse and recidivism.

During reentry, peer support provides assistance with treatment planning and system navigation including accessing housing, employment, benefits, etc. When initiated prior to release, peer support activities include preparing individuals in jails and prisons to develop plans and identify resources to ensure uninterrupted treatment and connection with a recovery community.

Thankfully, in our SOC we are fortunate to have peers who are achieving great things in their professional lives and in their own recovery. These individuals have overcome many barriers to achieve success and they are passionate about giving back to the community. Utilizing the skills of these individuals is one of the most cost-efficient and effective ways to promote recovery for those in our local jail.

As we continue to see the successes playing out in real time, we are grateful to Grays Harbor County Sheriff’s Office and Coastal Community Action Program for supporting the work of peers and leading the way in this endeavor. These innovative partnerships are truly impacting the health of the whole community.

System of Care By the Numbers:

- 73 individuals accepted into the program
- 60 individuals provided MAT
- 6 individuals accepted into Therapeutic Court
- 7 individuals placed in long-term treatment
- 50 individuals enrolled in re-entry services
 - 26 active, 10 in community, 16 in custody

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"Rick's" Road to Recovery

Note: to protect the participant's privacy, his name has been changed. His story has not.

Rick's story represents an all too common outcome from a childhood full of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). He was raised by parents with a very dysfunctional relationship. His father was in and out of prison frequently, and was physically and mentally abusive to both Rick and his mother.

When his father was home, Rick was along for the ride as he ran drugs. He recalls that around age 6 he was frequently in the back seat of the car while his dad was "working". He would sleep in his school clothes and keep his backpack with him, so he was ready for school when his dad "got off work". As he got older this was no longer an option, so at age 8 he was given a key to the house and had to fend for himself while his parents were out.

At age 12, his parents got divorced which brought with it new challenges. Rick was in the middle of a contentious situation which did continuous damage to his sense of belonging. During this time, Rick suffered a broken jaw, and was prescribed opiates. Although he did not fall into addiction then, he does remember that he liked the way they made him feel, or rather not feel the emotional pain he was dealing with.

In middle and high school Rick started buying and selling pills. He had small brushes with the law (minor in possession), that concerned his mother. From then on, in her opinion it was safer to let him hold parties at home and provide the alcohol than it was for him to partake somewhere else. Rick also recalls going down to the local corner store and purchasing alcohol throughout his high school years. "They made a lot of money from me."

By the age of 17, with his second taking a vehicle without permission charge, the judge got tough and told him that he could join the military or face prison time. Rick decided the military was the route he wanted to take which led him to two tours of Afghanistan in a combat unit.

A few months prior to his first deployment, at age 19, he got married. He was injected with heroin by his father as a way to "celebrate" his nuptials. The young marriage fell apart while Rick was deployed, and the stress of navigating that betrayal when he returned compounded all of the underlying trauma he was carrying.

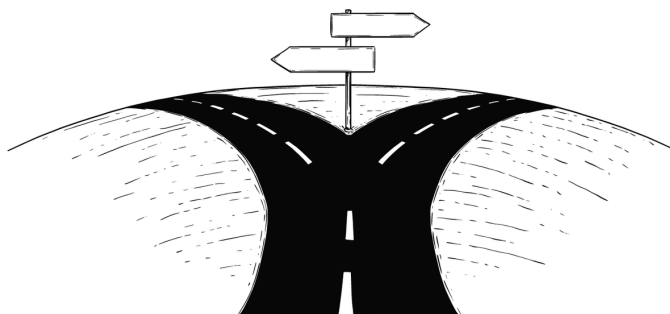
After his second deployment, with \$106,000 in the bank, he went to Florida to live near his dad. It did not take him long to blow through his money. He relates that reintegrating into society after his military deployment was very difficult, and partying became a way of life.

All told, Rick has had 7 felony charges, served 2 prison sentences and has been to 8 treatment facilities. He was what one would consider a "frequent flyer" in the County Jail. He is now 5 months into a 12 month treatment program, and intends to change the course of his life.

He gives praise to Lt. Byrd, Heidi and Jennifer for their work with the System of Care, and the impact it is having on people's lives. He shares that having peers to connect with who advocate for your health, and being able to engage in positive behavioral health classes while you are in jail is huge. He is especially grateful for the direct transportation to the treatment facility and the prospect of housing upon release.

Today Rick is gaining insight and coping skills to deal with the trauma that has underscored his substance abuse, and is setting goals for his future. When he completes his treatment he hopes to live in an Oxford house, secure a job as a delivery driver, and work toward getting his CDL.

He feels he has wasted the last 16 years of his life but he is grateful for the support system that he is continuing to build. A new life awaits – a life that he is now better prepared to fight for.



To learn more about the impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences:
mnprc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/aces-behavioral-health-problems.pdf