



Peer Services in Acute & Crisis Settings

In acute and crisis programs, peer support specialists have become an essential part of the recovery process for individuals under duress. Telecare uses two models of peer support services to better engage, empower, and advocate for people with serious mental illness in acute and crisis settings: **designated peer support specialists** and **employees with lived experience**. In Summer 2014, we will implement a third method, using external peer supports who will work side-by-side with staff and clients.

MODEL #1: DESIGNATED PEER SUPPORT SPECIALISTS

Where It's Used: Telecare Recovery Partnership in Lakewood (TRP), Washington
Program Type: Acute inpatient program, serving people on a voluntary and involuntary basis
Length of Stay: 5 – 17 days

Pierce County opened an inpatient Evaluation and Treatment Center (E&T) program in 2010 — called Telecare Recovery Partnership — that incorporated peer support specialists within their mental health services. Peer support staff were originally supervised by the nursing staff, performing tasks which administrator Jim Presson observed did not effectively utilize their experience or resources. In 2011, Jim moved peer specialists into the rehabilitation division where they can provide a more hands-on approach with clients, facilitating group meetings or hosting one-on-ones.

“Clients open up to the peer support counselors and share with them what they hope to see as far as their treatment outcomes,” says Jim. “With the peer support people running most of the groups, or co-facilitating with rehab therapists, they do a very good job of making the initial bond with a client.”



*Peer Support Counselor,
Erika Sherwood from Telecare
Recovery Partnership.*

Erika Sherwood has been a peer support counselor at Telecare Recovery Partnership since its opening in 2010. While attending a program to learn employment skills five years ago, Erika received an information packet from a peer counselor who encouraged her to explore it. Five days, 40 hours of training, and one test later, Erika became a certified peer counselor.

“Most people diagnosed with mental illness don’t have any idea that they can be somebody. They don’t have any inkling that they can have a job, a car, a husband, a wife,” says Erika. “Until they see someone that does have those things, they are not going to know that it’s possible.”

Because everyone admitted into Pierce County E&T is involuntary, peer counselors often deal with a high level of defensiveness from patients who are not ready to accept help. Erika's training developed communication skills that help her filter through a new client's behavior, figure out how they are dealing with it internally, and provide the wisdom of experience that doctors might not be able to offer.

"I go over any questions they may have. I start to be a friend, a companion, almost," Erica says. "Recovery itself is a transition and a person's journey starts when they say it does. That journey usually begins with acceptance of mental illness. Certain things need to happen: building a support system, managing medication, managing symptoms, building friendships and starting to set goals. Following your dreams."

Beyond engaging and supporting clients with a counselor's lived experience, peer support staff often act as an advocate in administrative settings. Peer staff has helped Telecare make small and large changes in program design to make the recovery work and the treatment environment more welcoming and effective.

MODEL #2: EMPLOYEES WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

Where It's Used: Multnomah Crisis Assessment and Treatment Center (CATC), Portland, Oregon
Program Type: Crisis Residential
Length of Stay: Average of 7 days

Advocacy also plays a vital role in programs that use Employees With Lived Experience (EWLE). Telecare has hired EWLEs since 1965. By combining their own effective recovery strategies with the specialized training they receive, EWLEs provide invaluable contributions to client care and program operations, as well as contributing to program design at a broader level.

Portland's Multnomah Crisis Assessment and Treatment Center (CATC) is an example of the profound benefits of utilizing peer skills effectively.

First, Multnomah County empowered peers to help design the program, starting at the RFP stage. Recognizing a need for consumers of mental health services to have a stronger voice in their own recovery, the county assembled a group of peers in 2010 to write an RFP for a crisis center with a minimum of two peer support specialists staffed at all times. In June 2011, CATC opened its doors as one of the first programs in the county providing this service.

Second, EWLEs are making the program stronger day-by-day, advocating for clients' need as well as for operational enhancements.

"State-certified peer specialists engage clients individually and in groups," says Jim Sechrist, administrator of CATC. "People who have experience with their own recovery know what worked for them, and they're able to engage individuals experiencing a mental health crisis in a deeper, more intimate way. They're helping people with things like making crisis plans or gaining skills in talking with their doctors."



Peer Support Specialist Ashleigh Brenton from Multnomah County CATC. Photo by Benjamin Brink/The Oregonian.*

Their first-hand knowledge of receiving mental health services by the system administering them is a great advantage when planning an effective program. Due to their constant engagement, specialists are able to empower and provide additional advocacy for the people being served.

“As program administrators, you have these experts that are available to you when you’re deciding policies and procedures and who serve as a voice for patients,” Jim observes. “They help serve as a barometer for how healthy our culture is — it’s the heart and soul of the program.”

For more information on any of Telecare’s programs, please contact Faith Richie, SVP of Development, at frichie@telecarecorp.com or 510-337-7950.

***Attributions & Links:**

Multnomah CATC Photos:

Photo by Benjamin Brink/The Oregonian

http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2013/05/peer_support_counselors_are_ke.html

Telecare Information:

Additional Program Information: <http://www.telecarecorp.com/programs/>