



NEW JERSEY

“We have peers everywhere. It is important to have the view of a peer as you are developing peer initiatives.”

RECRUITING, TRAINING, AND DEPLOYING FORENSIC PEER SPECIALISTS (FPS) TO SUPPORT REENTRY PLANNING

Project Background, Vision, and Outcomes

Recent bail reform in New Jersey has resulted in speedier trials and less people held in jails due to the near elimination of bail. While these changes have allowed individuals to move more quickly through the legal system, this quicker due process limits the time available to complete a thorough psychological evaluation of people arrested and booked in jail and link them to appropriate treatment.

The vision of this project was to hire two forensic peer specialist to engage with people suspected of having a mental illness and who are in the pre-trial phase. Forensic peer specialists use their lived experience to establish connections and shepherd them into community-based services. The partners that assisted in completing this work included the community provider(s) who hire the peer specialist, county jails, local courts, and pre-trial and probation officers.

The main established outcome were connections between forensic peer specialists and pre-trial individuals. Data was collected on the number of people in jail screened for a mental illness, number of people connected to follow up support, and how long the connection took. The project led to increases in connections to service among a historically underserved population.

Project Implementation: Challenges and Lessons Learned

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic impacted both programming and operations in jails. Overall, process was slowed down from the start during the pandemic. Additional barriers to service delivery also produced delays in “getting things moving, defined, in place, and funded”. Several challenges to implementation were competing priorities, slow decision making and change

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management processes among judiciary partners, staffing shortages, and differences in timeline expectation among partners. To overcome some of the staffing shortages, leadership increased. For example, some positions that traditionally paid a \$75k annual salary are now posted for \$95k annually.

Sustainability and Project Legacy

This project was developed to recruit, train, and deploy forensic peer specialist to work with pre-trial individuals with a mental illness, and support them in community settings. When funding ends, New Jersey would like to make peer specialists a credentialed role who can be used throughout the system on various treatment teams. Additionally, leadership is exploring Medicaid reimbursement for mental health peer services or other avenues to make that a billable service.

Health Equity

The project was designed to address people in jail, and those recently released, with a mental health need in order to facilitate access to appropriate treatment and services that can prevent

decompensation and improve mental health outcomes. From an equity standpoint, the program serves people who “historically had no connections to mental health services.”

Peer Services Utilization

Currently, both mental health and substance use peer support services are embedded in hospital care teams. Additionally, peers review requests for proposals and other administrative documents to ensure that appropriate and person-first language is used. Leadership continues to work towards making sure everyone understands what the peer’s role is.

Trauma Informed Care

Prior to receiving Transformation Transfer Initiative (TTI) award funding, leadership was already creating a trauma informed agency. Trauma informed care is incorporated into organizational trainings, and leadership strives to incorporate trauma informed care into most programming areas.

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