

## BRINGING PEER VOICE TO STATE COORDINATION OF FORENSIC SERVICES: FLORIDA



**“Peers bring a fresh perspective  
to solving old problems.”**

–Leah Compton, former Project Director

### VISION

The Department of Children and Families' Office of Substance Abuse and Mental Health (SAMH) coordinates Community Forensic Liaison Teams (CFLT) in each of the six regions of the state. Teams are responsible for improving regional outcomes for adults with behavioral health conditions that are justice involved, reducing health and social disparities, and strengthening collaboration between mental health and justice systems. While peers are involved in providing direct services in their respective regions, peer voice has been missing at the state level. SAMH used TTI funds to hire three persons with lived experience to participate in regional and statewide coordination, problem solving, development of standards and policies, and training and technical assistance. The figure on the next page underscores the collaboration required by all stakeholders, including persons with lived experience, in developing successful jail diversion approaches.

### JAIL DIVERSION APPROACH

Forensic peer liaisons working within the SAMH Community Forensic Liaison program provide oversight to SAMH's forensic community-based systems of care that impact all points of intercept including diversion and reentry in the state. Forensic peer liaisons were assigned to:

- Assume a leadership role in the newly formed Statewide Forensic Peer Specialist Workgroup.
- Develop statewide specialized curriculum for Forensic Peer Specialist certification.
- Work with the Florida Certification Board to adapt specialized Forensic Peer Specialist curriculum for certification.
- Develop and deliver statewide training specifically for peer specialists working with law enforcement crisis intervention teams, state hospitals, emergency rooms, jails/prisons, courts/specialty courts, mental health providers, and other community settings.
- Develop inventory tool/database and track Forensic Peer Specialists specifically working in the criminal justice/behavioral health/substance abuse field.
- Develop a statewide strategy to enhance Forensic Peer Specialist networking, training, support, and collaboration.

### MEASURING PROGRESS

Three peers were hired as forensic peer liaisons and assumed leadership of the Statewide Forensic Peer Specialist Workgroup. The COVID-19 Pandemic ▶

**COLLABORATION IS KEY TO SUCCESSFUL JAIL DIVERSION PROGRAMS**



shifted duties from their planned assignments as states scrambled to implement risk reduction measures and deal with reduced capacity at state facilities. Forensic peer liaisons assisted by case managing the backlog of forensic patients (those hospitalized for competency restoration and Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity status) in state hospitals awaiting release. During this period, they also developed a forensic peer specialist training curriculum that was piloted and approved. The training will be conducted on a quarterly basis.

**INTEGRATION WITH CRISIS SYSTEM**

SAMH Community Forensic Liaisons did not provide direct services.

**BEHAVIORAL HEALTH EQUITY**

Due to Department prohibitions against employing individuals with arrest histories, peers with justice system lived experience could not be hired. Although every effort was made to recruit peers of color, none were available to hire. The positions paid \$38,000 (plus \$10,400 in benefits) placing them within second quartile of average salaries in Florida.

**PROJECT LEGACY**

Although they demonstrated their flexibility and value to maintaining essential services during the Pandemic, forensic peer liaisons were re-assigned from their primary mission for much of the TTI funding period. The legacy of their involvement in policy development is still being shaped. Ongoing funding for the positions has not been identified.

**WHAT HAS BRINGING PEER VOICE TO STATE COORDINATION OF FORENSIC SERVICES TAUGHT US?**

While hiring peers into state agency policy positions is not an uncommon or radical act, it is still subject to misunderstanding and the political exigencies and priorities of changing government administrations. Creating opportunities for staff to know and work with peers can change attitudes and make more permanent reforms possible.

For more information on this project, contact Asta Trinh at [asta.trinh@myflfamilies.com](mailto:asta.trinh@myflfamilies.com).