

SUPPORTING REENTRY WITH
PEER SUPPORT FACILITATORS:

PUERTO RICO



“People go back to the Justice system because they have nowhere else to go. We are here to fill that gap, to guide and motivate and to strengthen social skills.”

–Juan Velez, Project Director

VISION

Among the many challenges facing people with behavioral health disorders when they leave the justice system are the lack of positive social supports and familiarity with social skills needed to succeed in employment and higher education. SAMHSA identifies peer support services among the key elements for diversion at reentry from incarceration, intercept 4 of the Sequential Intercept Model. Individuals who have gone through the transition from jail or prison to the community successfully can help people plan for reentry, identify safe housing, and learn about triggers or issues that could lead back to the justice system. The peer “support facilitators” of the Mutual Support Center see their role as creating safe spaces for consumers to form new and positive relationships and learn social skills that will help them start and keep a job or attend educational classes. Support facilitators guide and motivate consumers to develop and integrate strengths using as their model SAMHSA’s 8 Dimensions of Wellness: social, environmental, physical, emotional, spiritual, occupational, intellectual, and financial.¹

JAIL DIVERSION APPROACH

Support facilitators have been active in diverting individuals with behavioral health disorders at multiple points in the

justice system. They are integrated into the clinical teams of six Recovery Centers and have established support groups for persons diverted from jail. For several years, support facilitators have worked with courts to divert individuals from incarceration and into community care. Most recently, support facilitators have worked closely with police and municipal government leaders to reach out to individuals at risk of arrest and incarceration on the street in some of the poorest communities in the commonwealth to engage them in treatment. Although the project seeks to hire peers who also have lived experience in the justice system, credentialing them as certified peer specialists has required requests for special waivers. Once credentialed, corrections and the Courts have welcomed their participation on site.

MEASURING PROGRESS

Much of the information support facilitators gather is anecdotal. The Mutual Support Center has brought on an evaluator to collect data that will demonstrate the program’s impact on reducing incarceration while improving quality of life outcomes.

INTEGRATION WITH CRISIS SYSTEM

The Mutual Support Center regularly collaborates with detoxification centers, primary health care centers, ►

PHOTOS FROM PUERTO RICO'S TTI PROJECT



the courts and the police departments in areas in which they provide services. Several former members of the Mutual Support Center now participate in the Puerto Rico Mental Health Planning Council.

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH EQUITY

Behavioral health services in the Commonwealth are much less available to women than to men. While peer support is available to either gender at the Mutual Support Center, they have made a concerted effort to hire more women and people of color.

PROJECT LEGACY

The Mutual Support Center seeks to change systems as well as the trajectory of individuals through education. Support facilitators have demonstrated to judges and correction officers that recovery is possible and

have even coached them on questions and statements that will achieve more positive results. Through the availability of other funding sources, peer support services including outreach efforts have been sustained.

WHAT HAVE SUPPORT FACILITATORS TAUGHT US?

The Mutual Support Center reaches out to all communities and institutions to help them understand that recovery is possible and likely and to understand the contribution that peer support can make. They continue to work with guilds such as the association of social workers to incorporate education and training for their members and students on peer support services.

For further information on this project, contact Juan Velez Court at jvelez@asmca.pr.gov.

¹U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2016). Creating a Healthier Life: A Step-By-Step Guide to Wellness. (HHS Publication No. 2016 SMA-16-4958). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration