

Developing a Solid and Effective

~Peer-Driven~

Forensic Peer Support Program

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Acknowledgements

Throughout this paper, there is a strong emphasis on using strengths, skills, and interests of people involved in creating, initiating and driving a program. Team work is necessary in the development of many projects. This paper is an example of the use of the strengths, skills and interests of team members. Here I acknowledge those involved in the writing and proofing of this paper with the strengths they used.

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The Main Link Forensic Peer Support Program (FPSP) started with the hope that incarcerated individuals diagnosed with Mental Illness would develop positive supports while in the Bradford County Correctional Facility (BCCF). The hope was the individuals would maintain the positive relationships upon release and continue to receive support to successfully re-enter the community and live meaningful lives with decreased chances of recidivism.

Since its inception, The Main Link Forensic Program has become a Pennsylvania endorsed model of Forensic Peer Support in which services span all five points of the Sequential Intercept Model (Mark R. Munetz, M.D. and Patricia A. Griffin, Ph.D) offering peer support, mental health advocacy, and recovery education throughout the entire criminal justice system of Bradford County.

How did a peer-run program from the rural county of Bradford, Pennsylvania become so well known throughout the Pennsylvania and identified throughout several other states of the country? In short, the answer is through collaboration, systems support, needs/wants assessments, education, and planning.

As the former coordinator of The Main Link Forensic Peer Support Program and a person who continues to offer peer support within the criminal justice system, I present to you a strategy that will direct you toward the right track in developing a solid and effective peer-driven Forensic Peer Support Program.

Hire those whose experiences are essential to the program: Learn to recognize excellence

Hire people who understand the nuances of what and why the service is going to be offered. Specific to a Forensic Peer Support Program, you want to look for three (3) things in potential employees:

1. Experience involving Mental Health, Criminal Justice, and Recovery

Who better to understand the needs and barriers of people you want to serve than those who have been there? You will find that people with this experience are extremely passionate and motivated.

2. Experience participating on boards, committees, workgroups, and focus groups

In any program or business there will be meetings. Team members will be expected to communicate with others in the field. Ultimately the goal of a Forensic Peer Program is to divert people from the Criminal Justice System or prevent them from further penetration into the system. But, in the end, it is a business. No matter if you are making widgets, saving your bank, or diverting people from the Criminal Justice System – Your Team Will Have Meetings!

3. Experience with or strengths in writing and data collection

It is important to track program outcomes. Your funders and other stakeholders will want to know what you are doing, is the program successful, where is the money going, and are you doing what you said you were going to do. Documentation is a good start, but someone with strengths to compile and present all the information is necessary. Some activities that are important to track are: the number of people you support per quarter or per year; the unique circumstances of the target group; is your team staying current with best practices in the CJ/MH systems and accessing continuing education opportunities, and what are you giving back to the community (i.e. trainings to the public, anti-stigma events, etc.), are all things to identify and track

How do you find people with this experience that you can be confident will get the job done; and just as important, who will be able to communicate with counterparts of the Criminal Justice and Mental Health (CJ/MH) Systems? Advertise and seek referrals from other stakeholders. If you know an individual will be working closely with probation or parole, seek referrals from probation or parole officers. Who would they suggest? Is this a person you feel confident who is actively in recovery? Look to the Recovery Movement Community for people who are interested in becoming part of forensic mental health transformation. You can find great, established, or up and coming people who are already known and waiting for a chance to be a part of forensic mental health transformation.

It is important to understand that some team members' criminal backgrounds may not be overly welcome in the beginning stages of incorporating your service into the whole of the CJ/MH systems. This is one importance of Forensic Peer Support Programs – showing, “*I am the evidence.*” Be prepared to site examples of other forensic peer programs successes.

Additionally, pay is important. In any business it would be foolish to expect phenomenal work with less than decent wages. How your program is funded will determine how many team members you can employ and their rate of pay. Collaborating with existing peer support providers can help defray the costs of overhead and administration and may be a valuable resource for you to find team members.

Identify your Current Network

Everyone has a network. A key to being successful is identifying who can open the doors to the CJ/MH worlds. This could be your boss, a friend from another department, someone on your board of directors, or people you interface with during multi-disciplinary meetings.

It is easier to access the right meetings and get to know key personnel when you have someone who will vouch for you and advocate for your team's involvement.

Know what customers want

For any program or business to succeed, there needs to be an assessment of what would be of benefit. Ask the people who will be using the service and hire those with the life experience who understand first-hand the needs and wants identified.

A survey or even better, focus groups with various stakeholders, will help shape what services will be offered. Essential people to include are people with lived experience who know the criminal justice system first hand. Not only will you want to ask those currently involved with the criminal justice system or those with prior experience, you will want to know what the C.J. personnel see as barriers to successful community integration. Include conversations with mental health systems and county officials. It is best to survey these groups independently when doing focus groups to keep dialogue open and forth coming.

When you have all of this information, you can see what needs and wants can be addressed through peer support and what can be addressed through advocacy. More importantly, you want to identify what you cannot or will not offer; things for what peer support was not intended.

Choose which services you will provide

A business or program needs to grow and cannot begin with everything you want it to achieve. Maybe through your assessments you found that in the area you will be providing service there is a need for better support when in a crisis situation, more mental health education for the court system, more education about the criminal justice system in the mental health arena, positive supports for incarcerated people with mental health concerns and/or stronger advocacy for incarcerated people with mental health concerns when it comes to housing upon re-entry, etc.

Creating a program that targets all those needs from the beginning would cost a fortune, need more employees than one could hire immediately, and potentially fail throughout due to lack of attention or poor publicity of one component.

Ask what you are capable of successfully offering quickly and within the scope of your chosen path of peer support. Are you going to offer advocacy, education, one-on-one peer support? When you decide that, whom will you educate first: incarcerated individuals, systems personnel, providers? Where will you focus your advocacy: in the court system, jails/prisons, or during the re-entry process? Will you offer one-on-one peer support right from initial arrest, in court or in jail? What resources do you have or will you have at your disposal? Will you have enough resources to get people to appointments, access the jail, or aid in housing?

A few tips to help you:

1. Start where your county is already investing time and money

Offering peer support services can enhance existing programs. Complimenting services and initiatives in your county is a great way to speed up use and knowledge of your service.

If your county is initiating diversions centering on first-responders (emergency-response and police) it would be good to target how peer support would fit. Maybe looking into partnering with emergency rooms and having an on-call person to offer peer support would be a great addition; or, if the county is looking into Crisis Intervention Teams, offering peer support on the team or incorporating Pat Deegan's *Hearing Voices Simulation* into the education curriculum for first-responders and mental health training sets would be a benefit.

2. Do not duplicate services

Offer a service that is needed or wanted. If your county is invested in diverting people in jail from recidivating and a provider is offering Wellness Recovery Action Planning (*WRAP*) classes to those that have been incarcerated, you do not want to offer that service. Talk with others who are already offering diversion. Maybe instead work on a Community Re-entry

Program that assists incarcerated individual either paroling or maxing-out in planning for the expectations and barriers of successful community integration. It is always important to establish partnerships more than competitions.

3. Consolidate your list of wants and needs

Become familiar with the Sequential Intercept Model (*Munetz and Griffin*). This important and easy to understand conceptual model will help identify categories or points of intercept in which you will be able to classify your service ideas. After this, target the point of intercept at which you will start and further group your ideas into what naturally goes together.

If you decide to work with the court systems, naturally, offering support to individuals during the court process would go well with mental health training of court personnel, involvement with Treatment Courts, and participation on committees and boards focusing on court issues.

4. Only pick one or two initiatives with which to start

Once you know where you will start and what ideas are possible to turn into great services, pick those that will be quickest to implement with the most success. You want a starting point that will establish you as a team player.

Bottom line: Program development is a slow process that needs a solid foundation to support new initiatives and components. If you believe your program will have a lasting benefit on your county and community, then you need to allow sufficient time to let the program grow in a natural and organic way.

Create a short term and long term plan

The next essential part of a successful Forensic Peer Support Program is establishing a first steps plan and a timeline to implement your next steps. By doing this you will have a reference point and something to sustain motivation. This is where you will plug in all the other ideas from the point of intercept you chose to work on and identify how and at what point you will branch out.

If your team decides to get involved in Community Re-entry and your first goal is to establish a Self Management and Recovery Training (SMART) Recovery Group for people leaving the jail, you will want to identify your first steps.

A first steps plan might look like this:

1. Review literature about SMART Recovery
2. List benefits to the users of this service
3. List benefits to the employer and the CJ/MH systems (Why would they refer people to this service)
4. Identify a team member who will facilitate the group until participants take the lead
5. Identify other services and providers who might contribute to this component
6. Identify people in your network whom you will tap to assist in getting your foot in the door.
7. Create a budget and proposal for clarification and review (INCLUDE A LINE ITEM FOR TRAVEL AND CONTINUING EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES!!)
8. Seek feedback and if necessary revise the proposal

The timeline will build off of your first success. When the SMART Recovery group is established, what is the next logical step? Do you request membership with the county Criminal Justice Advisory Board (*CJAB*)? Do you need to learn other resources in the community to support those facing barriers of sobriety, transportation, or housing? Do you begin to offer community peer support services or tackle initiatives from the other side and work toward offering groups in jail?

You will change your first steps plan and timeline throughout the growth of the program. Sometimes you will have to account for budgetary or organizational barriers. Many times you will discover through the people you support that there is a bigger need that would be of greater benefit in which to establish support that wasn't written in your plan or timeline. Let it grow naturally. Be flexible and keep your ears open to what individuals you support are saying.

Learn the jargon, philosophies, and latest information in the field

Research, research, research! Every occupation has its own language or jargon. Learn the acronyms for both the MH/CJ systems, not just one. Know the jargon of inmates and consumers of services, of parolees and participants of self help groups. This falls back on hiring people with more experience than you. It is one thing to learn acronyms and talk a certain jargon, but you must have a versatile vocabulary when interfacing with several groups and systems.

Understand that it is important to know there is a difference in philosophies among systems and groups. The philosophies of the MH and CJ systems are very different, so are the philosophies of those with the experience of incarceration, inpatient hospitalization, court ordered outpatient services and those that experience community corrections requirements. To fully understand the many facets and aid in the

transformation toward a unified system, you must know how best to effectively communicate with all sides and understand the “Whys” of each group’s view.

Go to conferences, workshops and trainings that center on CJ/MH topics. This is the best way to identify the initiatives and trends in this field. Include all of the team that will be supporting people. It is important for all people involved to experience and learn from these venues. The experience of seeing transformation and cohesive partnerships throughout the systems aids everyone in establishing rapport and understanding of all involved. The team you create is not an island unto itself; it is an involved subgroup that interacts with many other cultures with similar goals and objectives. Together all the involved systems create a society of people working together and trying to understand and transform each other into a more unified and effective collective.

Know the initiatives of the county, state, and federal governments. Learn what has already been accomplished and what work is currently being done.

Develop the Network

Get to know your partners community, county, state, and nationwide. Identify contact persons from organizations working on the same goals. Know the police departments, district attorneys, judges, wardens, and probation or parole officers. Get involved with housing groups in your county. As you develop, you will find housing to be a main issue needing much attention.

Get involved with county and state consumer organizations. Find other counties and providers that are working on similar projects. Seek out national organizations that focus on Forensic Mental Health transformation.

Enroll in email newsletters; review web pages of the organizations that are active in this transformation. Most importantly, contact the people who are doing it. Many people do not realize that if you can email or call movers and shakers, chances are they will respond! Set up meetings or request invitations or inclusion on boards and committees on the county and state levels.

Document and Promote your success

Here is where a lot of teams lose out. There is a saying in the “direct care” world: *“If it’s not documented, it didn’t happen.”* This is absolutely the truth when it comes to success. As your program becomes more and more known, people are going to want data. They are going to want to see the number of people you support; proof that your program is beneficial, they are going to ask budgetary questions; they will ask for program descriptions and request to know how many people were diverted or have not recidivated while using your services. Key information that will be of particular interest are how much money and jail days were saved by utilizing your program (realized cost saving.)

It is best to get in the habit of creating data and progress reports monthly, quarterly, annually. (Yes, here is the bog down of offering a service.) This is why you want someone on your team with the strengths and interests of collecting data and writing reports. This attention to detail will pay off! If nothing else, keep an actively updated history of the progress your team and program have made. At the end of this paper is The Main Link Forensic Peer Support Program History for those who would like to see a sample.

Promoting your success is the way to being acknowledged as an active partner in the transformation of systems. Through promotion you will more easily gain access to the committees and workgroups that will benefit the people you support and serve. By promoting your successes, you will earn the respect of your partners and show you are not a fly-by-night program. People and systems will want to include you and work with you on joint projects, you will become known for the work that has been done; and, most importantly, you will be able to more prominently include the voices of those you support in what should or could be changes to create a more effective system.

For those that are thinking, *“I’m not in this to gain acknowledgement, I only want to support people in staying in the community!”* Understand that through recognition and acknowledgement of the success of people you support, the success of your program and respect of being professional and diligent, you open more opportunities to funding, access to more resources, and generally overall ease of access of both CJ and MH systems. It is important to advertise success for the success of those you support!

Final Thoughts

This should give you a good starting point. Though the concepts are easy, it can be a daunting task to create a successful and effective program.

1. Treat the team members as a board of directors

All of the team members should be privy to all the information about the program - including budget, next steps, choices in further development and barriers. They should be included in trainings, committees and most importantly everyone should be doing the ground work to make sure everyone keeps to the purpose of the program. By creating an informed and cross-trained team, you are assuring that everyone will be able to assist with every aspect of the program and you will discover strengths that will benefit the growth of new projects and program components.

2. You will become frustrated and discouraged

Again, there are different philosophies and views when it comes to criminal justice and mental health. Some philosophies do not completely coincide with each other. It is best to remember you will be a part of transforming the system and transformation can be a slow process. When frustration occurs, it

is best to remember the one mile rule: Say nothing until one mile away with the windows up. You are allowed to vent frustration but keep it to your team and supervisors until further direction can be established.

Program development is a slow process that requires a solid foundation. Move slowly to secure program components before you begin another project. Make sure you have man power, funding, and support from partners before you begin another project.

3. Seek assistance and advice

Get in the habit of working with others. We are not here to change the system; we are here to be part of the change in the system. No one can do it alone. Ask questions, get involved, and grow with the feedback from all the stakeholders in the CJ/MH systems.

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Forensic Peer Support Program (FPSP)

The Main Link Forensic Peer Support Team focuses on cultivating a supportive and resourceful relationship with inmates who have received mental health services and maintaining the relationship when they are released from incarceration. Weekly visits focus on peer support, recovery and community resources. When the individual is soon to be released from the facility we assist them in finding supports in the community that may prevent them from re-entering the forensic system.

Forensic Peer Support Program

The Main Link forensic peer support team (FPST) focuses on cultivating a supportive and resourceful relationship with individuals and maintaining this relationship when they are released from the county correctional facility.

Our team visits weekly with the incarcerated individuals who are referred to us by a master's level forensic specialist. These visits last approximately 30 minutes, and focus on peer support, recovery and community resources. We address questions and concerns about the process they are going through – incarceration, court hearings, etc – We introduce information about mental health recovery as it is presented in the document, “A Call for Change.” In addition we offer our presence at scheduled court appearances.

When the individual is within 30 days of being released from the facility, we help explain the process that they will go through upon release – going to the courthouse, talking to probation, setting up appointments for MH or D&A services. We offer to bring applications for services they might need for public assistance and employment opportunities.

In January of 2007 the forensic peer support team began offering group dialogues centering on recovery, recidivism education, co-occurring disorder, and ways to work on personal goal planning. Also in 2007 the forensic peer support team began working with inmates who are released – or within 30 days of being released – to assist them in finding beneficial supports in the community that may prevent them from re-entering the forensic system.

Our post release services include transportation from the jail, to appointments, and to urine tests. We offer transportation services until the individual is set up with our local transportation system. The Main Link is open to these individuals for socialization and phone use. Should individuals be restricted to home monitoring, Team members visit their homes. Team members also offer to be peer mentors to those released from the facility – offering visits to their home, community engagements, and general peer support.

During a group dialogue, inmates expressed they would have a better chance of success if they could begin establishing linkages in the community with services and support before release. The inmates and the Forensic Peer Support Team spent several group visits developing a program description to address the needs of those who would use the service. When it was completed, the Forensic Peer Support Team presented it as a

proposal to the County Office of Mental Health and Criminal Justice Advisory Board for approval.

In March, 2009, The Main Link's *Work Release for Recovery (WRR)* program was initiated. WRR offers inmates the opportunity to leave the jail one day a week to familiarize themselves with parole officers, service providers, housing assistance programs, and community supports three months before they are released from the correctional facility.

Individuals create a Work Release for Recovery Strategy Plan that identifies the groups, educational opportunities, services and supports they will access while at The Main Link. They can schedule time with parole officers, tour service providers and court offices. Through supportive community businesses, the inmates will be able to gather clothing and furniture, and learn about other services they may need in an emergency when living in the community.

Individuals can seek employment from a variety of venues including our county's Career Link, Temp Services, or standard Job Hunting in the Towanda area.

Within a month of release, inmates can start the application process to reestablish their disability or cash assistance benefits.

During the development of WRR, The Main Link was approached by the Pennsylvania Mental Health Consumer Association (PMHCA) to create a *Peer Support within the Criminal Justice System Training* funded and endorsed by the Office of Mental Health Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS). In May of 2009, in collaboration with the Pennsylvania Peer Support Coalition (PPSC), the first training was facilitated; training 20 people from across PA to effectively initiate and offer Forensic Peer Support in their counties.

The three day dialogue driven training centers on navigating the CJ System, using lived experience to offer support to MH consumers in the system advocating for change, and educating CJ personnel.

During 2009-10, the Forensic Peer Support Program expanded to include six employees (from four). One new employee, currently on Federal Parole, focuses on peers with Co-occurring diagnosis, and assists them through D&A recovery support.

Peer support is now offered immediately after arrest through self referral (with a referral system in development) and will follow a justice involved mental health consumer. Peers now support individuals through attaining a lawyer or public defender, through initial hearings, and continue with the support (if the individual chooses) through the paths of probation, ARD, Jail, or other community corrections. After the Justice involve event, individuals may choose to continue receiving peer support services working on personal goals and continuing recovery based education and tool learning.

Peer mentors have begun the process of recovery education as part of cross systems training. Dr. Patricia's Deegan's: *Hearing Voices Simulation* was offered to Jail personnel and county TCM workers. The Jail personnel found this training immediately effective with correctional officer that they have requested The Main Link to offer this training annually to all staff at the jail. The Main Link FPSP is currently planning to offer this training to other personnel in the Criminal Justice and Mental Health systems.

OMHSAS requested that employees of The Main Link FPSP present information about The Main Link Forensic Program and its philosophies at the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD) conference held in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Further; OMHSAS requested a program employee to sit as a Mental Health Rep on a state team currently developing Veterans MH Services funded through SAMHSA.

This collaboration among the jail, service providers and the mental health offices is yet another example of our county's commitment to reduce recidivism and solidify community integration for mental health consumers involved in the criminal justice system.