

Santa Cruz County Clinic Services Medication Assisted Treatment Program: Peer Support Specialist (Peer Mentors)

Overview – Peer Mentors provide a human face to recovery from opioid addiction and combat the stigma of Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT).

Challenge – Millions of people in the United States are struggling with opioid addiction. California is experiencing an increase in opioid abuse, addiction, and overdose deaths, especially among those most marginalized in our society. We continue to see an alarming increase in opioid overdose deaths in Santa Cruz County.

Solution – The MAT Peer Support Specialist Program provides two services. The first is for patients who are doing well in their recovery through the MAT Program, some of whom were formerly utilizing the Syringe Services Program (SSP), to become peer mentors and contribute their experiences to the program. The second is to provide peer mentoring services for patients recovering from substance use disorders. Mentors are trained through evidence-based practices to effect change and provide hope to other patients experiencing addiction in the community. It also gives mentors the tools they need to step into the social service field. Patients experience hope in seeing peers doing well, which helps combat stigma. Training is provided to the peer mentors through a curriculum as well as through hands on experience. They are taught how to effectively share their story, give presentations with staff at various agencies as well as to our own staff. They work shifts, train people on how to use Narcan, bring people to the clinic to get connected to primary health care, and provide outreach with staff at homeless encampments. Peer mentors facilitate and co-facilitate some of the MAT support groups. When challenging times arise for the peer mentors, MAT staff is available to support. The program also collects patient stories to share (with their permission) with the goal of ending stigma related to addiction and recovery. The MAT team recruits and trains patients who have progressed in their own recovery and want to help others achieve similar positive outcomes. A basic assumption is that patients in long-term recovery, with proper training, demonstrate a strong ability to form positive therapeutic bonds with newer patients. The program recognizes and builds upon the initial gains made by the patient by retaining the patient in treatment while providing evidence-based practices such as motivational interviewing. There is no singular solution to combatting the opioid addiction and an array of modalities are offered to respect the many different paths to long-term recovery. The Peer Mentor Program continues to evolve and has become a successful modality that provides an opportunity for patients to give back and

display their success as a means of offering hope to others who are suffering and an opportunity to gather professional tools to be employable in this field.

Innovation – To combat stigma associated with MAT, this innovative program uses collaboration between treatment providers and patients. Peer mentors provide mentoring services for newer patients who are struggling with recovery. This treatment is designed to increase retention and produce positive treatment outcomes. Having patients come full circle from utilizing the SSP prior to their work in recovery to volunteering their time in the SSP and mentoring others is unique and incredibly effective. Patients are receiving training in established best practices in substance use disorder treatment and turning their experiences with addiction into tangible success that offers hope to those who are still struggling. These volunteers provide a human face to their recovery and work hard to end stigmatizing and false belief systems and practices that only serve to isolate patients and push them further from the help they need. The magic of the Peer Mentor Program is that it produces positive outcomes for both the mentors as well as those being mentored.

Results – Aside from offering a familiar and credible voice in inspiring others to maintain their recovery, peer mentors in our program have gotten jobs in their fields of interest due to the skills they have gained in this program. Some continue as mentors as they work on the steps to become fully certified as drug and alcohol counselors. The results are truly gratifying when we watch as these peer mentors have gone to college to pursue various degrees, come out of homelessness and reunite their families. As one mentor shares, “I’m living in a sober living environment now—and I help other people who are new to recovery. The Monday meetings in the MAT program are an impactful part of my recovery. It’s just a meeting I keep close to my vest. There are a lot of people there struggling—we share feedback. Hearing what’s going on with their (struggles) recharges my belief in what I do.” Another mentor shared, “Right now I’m in the Drug and Alcohol program at Cabrillo College, taking classes and learning about things like early-onset dementia. Now, when I get angry, I can look at my situation and think what I would say to help a client! I’ve been a caregiver now for about three years.”

Replicability – This program is not costly and is easily replicated in local programs.

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Additional Materials – <https://bit.ly/3xUPXQE>