

## From Prison to Purpose: Forensic Peer Mentors Unlock the Door to Successful Re-Entry for Returning Citizens

In 2014, Georgia’s Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD), Department of Corrections (GDC), and the Georgia Mental Health Consumer Network (GMHCN) embarked on a partnership to offer an innovative peer support program. This partnership, the Forensic Peer Mentor Program, expanded in early 2016 to include the recently formed Department of Community Supervision (DCS). The program provides



**2016 Cohort 2 Forensic Peer Mentor graduates with Jill Mays, Assistant Director, of DBHDD’s Office of Adult Mental Health; Gena Garner, Program Coordinator, GMHCN; and Michael Little, trainer-- Forensic Peer Specialist Coordinator, Pennsylvania Department of Behavioral & Intellectual Disability Services**

recovery-oriented support services to individuals with mental illness and/or co-occurring substance use disorders who are working to transition back into the community after being released from state correctional facilities and/or under court-mandated community supervision (i.e., probation or parole).

After completing 40+ hours of in classroom didactic and experiential training and passing an exam, peers are credentialed by the state as either a Certified Peer Specialist (CPS) or Certified Addiction Recovery Empowerment Specialist (CARES). In addition to their initial peer certification, forensic peer mentors (FPMs) complete an additional five full days of specialized forensic training designed to help them use their unique lived experience of past involvement with the criminal justice system and their recovery from a behavioral health disorder to help the people they support. This

week-long training is based on a Georgia-specific forensic peer curriculum that was developed for training.

The process of re-entry from prison back into the community can be overwhelming. According to a former staffer at Lee Arrendale, “I can vouch for the program. It was awesome! After meeting with their forensic peer, so many of the women told me ‘I’m not afraid to go home anymore.’ That’s huge!” FPMs empower participants—their peers—to identify and actively develop personal goals and objectives that will help them to be successful after release. Georgia’s 22 trained FPMs work to support individuals in the transition process, providing support both inside facilities and in the community. FPMs assist returning citizens with transition/release planning; obtaining stable housing; employment; disability benefits; medical benefits that will allow them to get needed medications; arranging transportation to appointments; getting linked to community mental health services and recovery supports; and learning new skills, all of which have been shown to greatly reduce recidivism.

Yet, the benefits of the program are not exclusive to the program participants. According to Sharon Williams, FPM at Lee Arrendale State Prison, “Working as a FPM means having the privilege to work with and give other returning citizens, such as myself, the opportunity to live and not just exist. By sharing my experience, strength, and hope, and walking side-by-side as peers on this journey of recovery, my hope is to be a guiding light, an inspiration, and living proof that recovery does work.” According to the GAINS Center, a national research and technical assistance agency, “Forensic peer specialists embody

### By the Numbers (Apr '15 – May '16)

- # Facilities staffed = 11
- # Enrolled = 216
- # Transition planning sessions = 5,367

### Program outcomes

(DRC & Hospital Participants + Post-release from Prison Returning Citizens)

Stable Housing	Avg. 90%
Employed	Avg. 67%
Linked to MH Services	Avg. 73%
Psychiatric hospitalizations	0%
New Arrests	10% *

\*Only participant with a new conviction had outstanding warrant that was not resolved during prison stay; was convicted on that charge following release.

the potential for recovery for people who confront the dual stigmas associated with serious mental illnesses and criminal justice system involvement.” Tariq Rashad, FPM for the forensic unit at Georgia Regional Hospital Atlanta shared similar sentiments about the satisfaction he feels from working to help his fellow peers move forward toward successful recovery in the community. “Being a FPM means to me more than just a job; it’s a passion and doing this work you have to love what you do. I become the evidence of hope for the peers I serve.”

This program developed in response to a priority identified by the Behavioral Health Coordinating Council, and solely supports individuals with a behavioral health diagnosis who are transitioning from correctional facilities and/or are under court ordered supervision in the community. As a result of the multi-agency collaboration and oversight by the Behavioral Health Coordinating Council’s Reentry Committee, we anticipate expansion into more prisons, transition centers, and day reporting centers in 2017. Additionally, this fall will begin training the third cohort of forensic peers.