

Forensic Peer Mentor Program Expands to Help More Georgia Returning Citizens

In 2014, Georgia’s Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD), Department of Corrections (GDC), Department of Community Supervision (DCS), and the Georgia Mental Health Consumer Network (GMHCN) embarked on a partnership to offer innovative peer support to Georgia’s Returning Citizens through the Forensic Peer Mentor Program. Plans are underway for the program to expand by January 2017. On November 28, 2016 a third cohort of fifteen CPS’s and CARES’s began the weeklong intensive didactic and experiential training--designed to help them use their own 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 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.



Cohort 3 convened at GDC's State Offices South at Tift College in Forsyth, GA for the 40 hour Forensic Peer Mentor Training, facilitated by Jill Mays (DBHDD; 1st row, 3rd from the left), Jonathan “DJ” Rees (The Main Link, Pennsylvania; 1st row, 2nd from right), and Sharon Williams (GMHCN; 2nd row, far right).

The training was facilitated by Jonathan “DJ” Rees, a subject matter expert on the Forensic Peer movement, as well as the Sequential Intercept Model, a concept that assists communities in identifying points of interception along the criminal justice system continuum where stakeholders can intervene to prevent individuals with mental illness from going to jail/prison due to offenses that may be related to their symptoms. According to Rees, “When Returning Citizens are released from jail, they face challenges like discrimination in being hired for a job and finding housing in the community. Despite these challenges, peer support can reduce the recidivism rate of people returning to jail.”

Upcoming program expansion will include placement of Forensic Peer Mentors at four additional GDC state prison sites, two additional DCS Day Reporting Centers, one additional Mental Health Court, and one additional DBHDD Regional Hospital. This expansion brings the total number of the forensically trained CPS and CARES workforce across the state to thirty-seven, and increases the number of worksites from eleven to seventeen. According to Jill Mays, Assistant Director of the Office of Adult Mental Health and coordinator of the Forensic Peer Mentor Program, “Since we enrolled our first Returning Citizen in April of

2015, the program has really taken off. Preliminary data is showing that we have been able to greatly increase successful re-entry and reduce the recidivism rate for individuals with mental illness and/or co-occurring substance use disorders who are being released from prison or on probation/parole. Our belief is that with support from the Forensic Peer Mentors and other appropriate community resources, all Returning Citizens have the capacity to live and thrive in the community.”

Forensic Peer Mentor Program Sites		
Day Reporting Centers	State Prisons	Mental Health Courts
1. Atlanta	1. Baldwin	1. Appalachian Judicial Circuit
2. Athens	2. Lee Arrendale	2. Cobb County
3. Gainesville	3. Phillips	3. Hall County
4. Griffin	4. Phillips Transition Center	
5. Morrow	5. Pulaski	DBHDD Regional Hospitals
6. Rome	6. Rutledge	1. Atlanta
		2. Central State