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Helping People Take Responsibility for Recovery

Our experience with providing recovery supports has shown that people come to us in all stages of readiness and willingness to do the work required to live comfortably in recovery. Some arrive with willingness to change. Others may be seeking a solution to the problems their use of alcohol and other drugs has caused. Few really understand how badly their lives have been affected by their dependence on these substances. Until those new to recovery embrace self-awareness and take personal responsibility for change, their chances of developing comfortable lives are slim.

Just because someone has entered treatment doesn't necessarily mean that he or she is committed to being in recovery. Many enter treatment hoping that professionals will somehow fix them. Even those desperate for treatment and a change in their lives don't understand how their lives have been disrupted or their need for recovery. This situation is compounded for those entering medication-assisted treatment for the first time. Seeking withdrawal symptom relief, many of these people accept treatment only as a necessary nuisance that must be endured to avoid the pain of withdrawal.

In our recovery system, you are in recovery if you say you are. We support our new friends through a lengthy process of coming to see the need for change, along with the potential for achieving comfortable and fulfilling lives in recovery. We engage with people where they are, and help them to do the next right thing in their lives. We strive to help people find ways to improve their lives from *their* perspective. We provide information as experts on recovery, but *we do not tell those exploring recovery what to do*. We approach them as peers and share our experiences and knowledge about the recovery process, while avoiding the power differential created between professional and "client." In fact, we avoid using the word "client," preferring terms such as visitor, friend, participant, person in recovery, guest or recoveree.

Our experiences working with treatment providers have demonstrated differences between peer recovery supports and the provision of formal treatment, while simultaneously underscoring the importance of building these collaborative relationships. People beginning treatment generally do not understand that they need to take personal responsibility for succeeding in treatment and recovery. While we regularly see people begin to take responsibility for their lives as a result of being around others who have progressed from active addiction into recovery, we also see those with a significant lack of self-awareness who may require the more structured confrontation of denial and education about addictions that are part of formal treatment.

For example, the Chittenden County Drug Court has referred many people to the Turning Point Center of Chittenden County. The Court requires all new drug court participants to take part in a six-session "Making Recovery Easier" group, funded along with recovery coaching by the Court Administrator's Office. Drug Court participants regularly report that they like and benefit from the

groups, and the Drug Court staff report that the groups are particularly effective in helping people connect with others in recovery, develop an understanding of the recovery process, and become willing to consider if not fully commit to the work required.

Initially, the Court staff asked new participants to attend at least one recovery coaching session at the beginning of their Drug Court involvement. Most of these Drug Court participants were not yet personally committed to their recovery process, and did not see the benefit of continued participation. Many dropped out of coaching, but continued to participate in their required treatment/case management regimens. Recovery center staff and Drug Court professionals discussed the situation, and the Court program now requires attendance at anywhere from 6 to 12 recovery coaching sessions, during the second phase of the Court program instead of one session during the first phase. Many receive coaching for longer. It appears that this additional time in treatment after exposure to recovery concepts has helped participants to develop a better understanding of how badly their lives have been affected by their addictions. Court staff report that the people who do not commit to working on their underlying issues don't have as good outcomes. Participants in the Court program are taking responsibility for improving their lives, engaging with recovery coaches, and connecting with other peer recovery supports.

The literature on mandated treatment suggests that it works as well as, and in some cases better than, voluntary treatment. Mandated recovery supports appear to provide the same benefit. A legal crisis demonstrates the need for taking personal responsibility and helps initiate action. Providing immediate immersion in a structured recovery process either leads to positive changes, or to a referral for more rigorous treatment services. The Burlington States Attorney's Rapid Intervention program has mandated and paid for participation in recovery coaching for people that screeners felt might benefit from at least three months of coaching as a sanction. Tracked outcomes show that almost all of the participants demonstrated significant progress in recovery and while improving their quality of life.

SAMHSA's Pathways to Recovery grant has made it possible for each recovery center to hire a part time recovery worker and offer facilitated recovery support groups that are welcoming to people on ALL paths to recovery. Treatment providers can now refer people to "All Recovery Meetings" and "Making Recovery Easier" groups across Vermont, and additional options will become available soon. Professionals have required participation in recovery groups as a sanction for the unmotivated and found them motivating. Certificates of attendance can be provided. It appears that the fear of losing access to medication support provides the same level of motivation that has "encouraged" those in court-based programs to participate in treatment and recovery activities.

Our collaborations with treatment providers help us moves people into ongoing and successful recovery who might not succeed in either treatment or recovery programs alone. We share the goal of helping people find life-long solutions for their struggles with obsession and compulsion. Working together, we help those in recovery replace shame, guilt, and the tattered social fabric of their former lives with optimism, enthusiasm and a secure home in the recovery community of their choice.