

According to a recent report, people with mental illness who need hospitalization in Vermont may wait days to get an inpatient bed. Such long delays can seem unbearable to patients who are already agitated. So Northeast Kingdom Human Services is teaching people to provide support for them in the hospital or at home.

Listen
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Some of these companions are people who have also experienced mental illness.

Their trainer is Rene Rose. She's a counselor at Northeast Kingdom Human Services in St. Johnsbury who believes that people with mental illness are especially good at helping others in the same situation. So she's encouraged clients who have become stable to help peers in distress weather all kinds of crises, including long waits in emergency rooms.

The team of helpers is called a cadre. One job, Rose explains at a training session, is to comfort a patient waiting for the nurse or doctor to arrive. If that patient is being difficult or unruly, an empathetic peer offers compassion—not judgment or rebuke.

“You just talk about what they are doing and ask them if they would be willing to do something different, rather than ‘you need to,’ so to speak,” she explains.

"You just talk about what they are doing and ask them if they would be willing to do something different, rather than 'you need to,' so to speak." - Rene Rose, Northeast Kingdom Human Services

Standing at a flip chart with a marker, Rose asks the students to list qualities of helpful people. “Compassion,” one suggests. “Flexibility,” another offers.

Rose says cadre members must be, above all, good listeners. At this workshop, experienced peers who have been diagnosed with mental illness share their stories with mental health staffers who may not have had that experience, but also want to join the cadre. The peers ask not to be named. One has been struggling with depression.

“I attempted suicide, ended up in the hospital, and that was the turning point in my life. For the first time, the doctors started looking at not just my medical health problems, but also my mental health problems together,” she tells the group in a voice just above a whisper.

As a cadre member, she says she tries to give patients hope that they, too, will find help.

Another peer supporter who has been medicated for bi-polar disorder says he once landed in a hospital in another state, and hated the experience.

“I was in an emergency room for six hours before they put me in a mental institution and all that was there was a police officer,” he recalls, twisting his hands.

He says the policeman was no help. But as a peer supporter in Vermont, he says he has been able to calm other patients down when they have been anxiously waiting for hospital beds.

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When a cadre member gets a call, he or she rushes to the patient’s home or the hospital, and stays with the patient as much as possible through the waiting period. One peer says she encourages her patients to participate in decision-making whenever possible.

“That’s why I am where I am today, because I demanded to be part of my treatment plan,” she says.

Team members are paid for their time and expertise, and also make written observations that clinicians say they value. But this cadre enthusiast says that for her, it’s not about money.

“Because I am giving back in a very small way for the years that people had to take care of me in the hospitals,” she explains.

Northeast Kingdom Human Services says it runs the first cadre pilot program of its kind in Vermont. So far, there are six members who have mental illness, and about 50 others who do not.

NKHS hopes to recruit more peers who have themselves been hospitalized for psychiatric care.

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