

Creating Recovery-Ready Communities

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This article explores the transformative impact of peer support specialists in creating communities where recovery is not only possible but probable. It focuses on the innovative approach of Wilkes Recovery Revolution, Inc. in addressing substance use disorders and the critical integration of harm reduction services to enhance current recovery efforts.

Introduction

I founded Wilkes Recovery Revolution, Inc., a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and an accredited recovery community organization (RCO) in Wilkes County, North Carolina, in 2016, to bring my lens of lived experience to the work of helping the substance use recovery and mental health community. The mission of Wilkes Recovery Revolution, Inc. (WRR) is simple: to create a community where recovery is not just a possibility but a palpable reality.

Throughout my personal journey, I encountered numerous barriers. At the age of 25, I found myself in a state of hopelessness, homelessness, and addiction to opioids following multiple ankle surgeries. However, my life had not always been this way; it was quite the opposite. I was raised in a loving, middle- to upper-class home, had opportunities to travel the world, graduated with honors, was recognized as “Most Likely to Be Remembered” in my senior year, played travel soccer, and received numerous competitive dance awards.

My story took a drastic turn after an ankle injury necessitated five surgeries, during which I was prescribed opioids for pain management. I vividly recall the first opioid I took while bedridden in a wheelchair, experiencing severe depression due to my lack of mobility. The opioid provided an instant sense of euphoria, a feeling I quickly became enamored with. As the euphoria faded, I found myself craving more to maintain that state of wholeness and empowerment.

Experiencing withdrawal was incredibly challenging; being “dope sick” was hard. Due to a lack of local services and support, I had to seek help outside my community and the place I called home. Upon finally finding my recovery pathway, I made it my mission to bring similar services to my hometown, ensuring others would have access to the support they need.

Since becoming the Founding Executive Director, I and the organization have been recognized by the United Way Great State Hero Award for Crisis Assistance, the Wilkes

Chamber of Commerce, the NC One Community in Recovery, Addiction Professionals of North Carolina, the 2022 Todd E. Whitworth National Humanitarian Award, and the National Recovery Community Organization of the year award in Washington, DC. I have shared my story and the work of Wilkes Recovery Revolution in *The Economist*, the *Winston-Salem Journal*, North Carolina Health News, Spectrum News, VICE Media, and WRAL Television, and I recently presented my first TEDx Talk.

I do not do this work alone. I have an amazing team of 26 individuals who all have lived experiences with substance use and mental health and create a dream team that is making a significant impact. With over 50% of its staff, board, and volunteers having lived experience with recovery, WRR embodies a peer-run model that resonates deeply with its community members. These peer support specialists meet individuals where they are with love and compassion so that the organization has a recovery ecosystem where individuals do not fall through the cracks.

A peer support specialist in substance use disorder (SUD) work is an individual who has personal experience with recovery from a mental health condition, substance use disorder, or both. They offer non-clinical, strengths-based support to others facing similar challenges. “Through shared understanding, respect, and mutual empowerment, peer support specialists help people become and stay engaged in the recovery process and reduce the likelihood of relapse” [1]. The philosophy of harm reduction, which is at the foundation of WRR’s work, acknowledges the complexities of substance use and seeks to minimize its harmful effects without requiring abstinence. Harm reduction allows WRR to provide a spectrum of options and creates a non-judgmental space where individuals can seek help at any stage of their recovery journey and self-direct their personal path to wellness.

The Wilkes Recovery Ecosystem

The organization now has a “recovery ecosystem” that supports various programming and support services, includ-

Electronically published September 9, 2024.

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N C Med J. 2024;85(5):329-330. ©2024 by the North Carolina Institute of Medicine and The Duke Endowment. All rights reserved. 0029-2559/2024/85513

ing the R3 Recovery Center, a haven offering free walk-in access to peer support specialists such as prosocial activities, groups, crisis assistance, and an array of services to support individuals reaching out for support. This network also includes Phases Transitional Housing, which provides stable housing to support individuals in their journey toward long-term recovery. WRR currently has four transitional housing facilities in Wilkes County. Wilkes Harm Reduction Collective offers on-site harm reduction services to reduce the negative consequences associated with substance use. These services include a mobile recovery health unit that travels into the community, syringe service programming, safer use training, and a naloxone distribution program.

Project HOW (Healing Our Workforce) empowers individuals to re-enter the workforce with confidence and support. Recovery Friendly NC advocates for a recovery-friendly workplace environment across North Carolina and serves as technical assistance support for communities across the state to implement practices to reduce stigma in the workplace and encourage employment of individuals in recovery. Fresh Start Farm promotes wellness and self-sufficiency through its therapeutic paid farming program that supplements the Wilkes Fresh Mobile Market. Wilkes Quick Response Team (CIT) responds rapidly to crises and provides immediate support, while Wilkes PORT (Post Overdose Response Team) works with community paramedics to offer compassionate care and resources following an overdose.

Revolution Thrift Store offers individuals opportunities to work and learn skills and support the organization's mission through community donations and thrift sales. Hope Warriors is a community and education initiative that offers a support network for individuals and families navigating the

challenges of recovery and enables us to create a community where recovery is not only possible but probable.

Through all the above services, WRR embodies an integrative approach to recovery. Integrated services are better placed to treat people as people. According to Harm Reduction International:

Treating clients as rounded individuals, rather than reducing clients to 'symptoms' or 'challenges' encourages self-care and solidarity, and empowers clients to demand their rights; Collaboration in multidisciplinary teams can ensure that integrated services are complementary; Providing a space where people can simply exist in comfort and safety is just as important as formal health and social services; and Holistic care and support can build self-worth, pride and solidarity, and combat the effects of stigma and discrimination [2].

Wilkes Recovery Revolution stands as a testament to the power of community-driven efforts in fostering recovery. Our integration of harm reduction services is not just a method—it's a message of inclusivity, respect, and unwavering support for every individual's path to recovery. NCMJ

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Acknowledgments

Disclosure of interests. The author is the founding executive director of Wilkes Recovery Revolution. No further disclosures were reported.

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