

# Special Topics

Engaging People with Lived Experience  
in Stepping Up Efforts

## CASE STUDY

**Tulsa County, Okla.**  
Population: 603,403



**Stepping Up** is a national initiative to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses in jails and is a partnership between the National Association of Counties, The Council of State Governments Justice Center and the American Psychiatric Association Foundation. Stepping Up hosts regularly scheduled webinars featuring topics to help counties' planning efforts. The Stepping Up Special Topics Case Studies serve as a quick reference to the counties highlighted in some of these webinars. Webinar recordings featuring these counties are available on the **Stepping Up Resources Toolkit**.

## Background

The Tulsa County jail incarceration rate increased 150 percent over the past 25 years, straining county budgets and negatively impacting the community. Recognizing that many individuals in the jail experience mental illness, substance use disorders and/or homelessness, the Tulsa County board of commissioners passed a resolution to join the national Stepping Up initiative in 2015. As part of these efforts and through conversations with Mental Health Association Oklahoma (MHAO), the county realized that understanding and integrating the perspectives of people with mental illnesses and substance use disorders, especially those who have been involved in the justice system and/or experienced homelessness, would be beneficial to include in planning processes for the county. Through creative partnerships and the inclusion of peers in the planning stages, Tulsa County created programs and services to better meet the needs of its most vulnerable residents.

## What is a Peer?

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), "a peer provider (e.g., certified peer specialist, peer support specialist, recovery coach) is a person who uses his or her lived experience of recovery from mental illness and/or addiction, plus skills learned in formal training, to deliver services in behavioral health settings to promote mind-body recovery and resiliency."<sup>\*</sup> Oklahoma has a significant network of certified peer recovery support specialists, or peers, supported by the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (ODMHSAS). In Tulsa County, peers take on the responsibility of educating and guiding clients with parallel

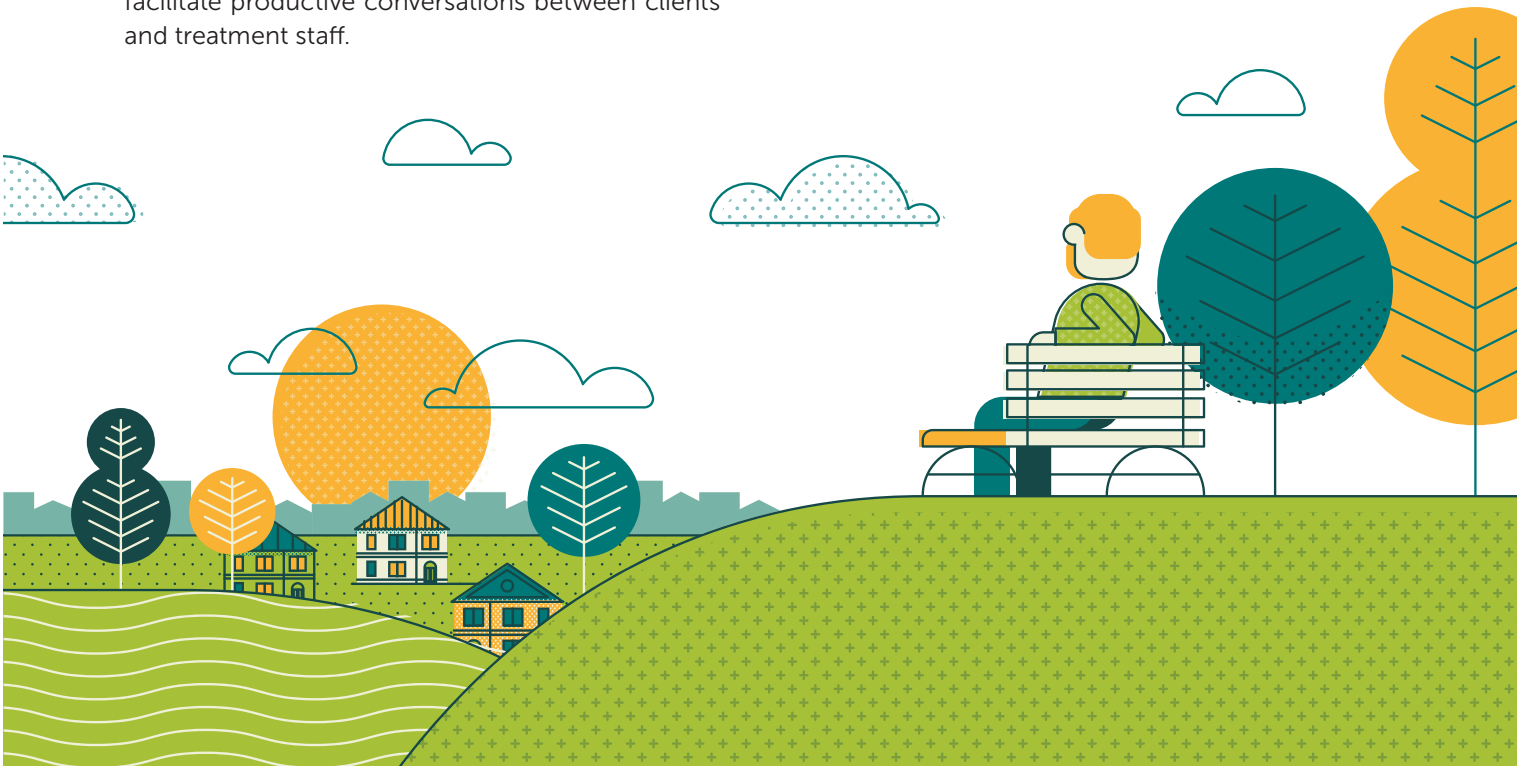
circumstances that are participating in programs outlined in this case study. Peers are people that have been recipients of mental health services for a serious mental illness and are willing to use and share their personal and practical experience to benefit both treatment teams and clients. To become a peer recovery support specialist, individuals must complete a 40-hour ODMHSAS training class, adhere to a code of ethics and renew their license yearly. Once certified, a peer has the opportunity to specialize in a particular population, such as those with criminal justice experience, veterans, young adults and people in Medication Assisted Treatment.

\* For more information, visit <https://www.integration.samhsa.gov/workforce/team-members/peer-providers>.

# Engaging Peers in All Sectors

Tulsa County, in partnership with MHAO, the City of Tulsa and ODMHSAS, offers a range of programs and services that utilize peers to better engage people with mental illnesses.

- The **City of Tulsa Municipal Special Services Docket** connects individuals with mental illnesses, co-occurring substance use disorders and/or experiences of homelessness to behavioral health services, employment and housing providers over a period of six months. Upon completion of the docket, charges, fees and fines are dismissed. Peers play a critical role in the operation of the docket, as they are enlisted to conduct initial screenings, provide ongoing navigation and attend monthly court hearings with clients for emotional support. The court docket serves about 150 individuals annually.
- Funded through ODMHSAS as part of the state safety network of behavioral health services, two **Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs)** operate in Tulsa County: Family and Children's Services and Counseling and Recovery Services. Each CMHC provides peer services that offer a safe space for individuals with co-occurring mental illnesses and substance use disorders, including those who are involved in the justice system. Peers work to make clients feel welcome and use their personal experience to guide clients through services and resources that are available in the community. Peers also acts as mediators to facilitate productive conversations between clients and treatment staff.
- **Programs of Assertive Community Treatment (PACT)** is an evidence-based service delivery model providing intensive, outreach-oriented mental health services for people with the most severe mental illnesses. Using a 24/7 team approach, PACT delivers comprehensive community treatment, rehabilitation and support services to clients in their homes, at work and in community settings. Building community supports such as PACT and other non-traditional programs of care allows an individual, who otherwise may be subjected to multiple hospital visits or jail, the ability to address the demands of their illness while remaining in the community. The program is intended to assist clients with basic needs, increase compliance with medication regimens, address any co-occurring substance abuse treatment needs, help clients train for and find employment and improve their ability to live with independence and dignity. Peers assist with guidance to PACT staff on how to provide courteous, helpful and respectful services to clients during intake. Currently, there are three PACT teams in Tulsa.



- The **Peer-run Drop-in Center, Denver House**, is operated by MHAO and utilizes peers to help clients navigate through housing services, employment opportunities, healthcare needs, mental health screenings and substance abuse treatment groups. All services are nonclinical and voluntary, and the center serves more than 1,000 individuals monthly.
- The **Tulsa Sobering Center**, a partnership of the city and 12&12 Inc.—a comprehensive community addiction recovery center for adults—offers a clean and safe place for law enforcement officers to take individuals detained for public intoxication, who have not committed any other crimes, to stay for a 10-hour period. The center is staffed with peers to encourage clients to participate in detox and other treatment opportunities.
- The county's **Re-entry Intensive Care Coordination Teams (RICCT)** are funded by ODMHSAS and are a collaboration among ODMHSAS, the Oklahoma Department of Corrections and community-based treatment agencies. RICCT teams are designed to transition individuals with serious mental illnesses and co-occurring substance use disorders from prisons to mental health and substance abuse treatment services, as well as to provide support in the community related to housing, medical care, vocational opportunities and various community resources. This community intervention is critical in order to reduce recidivism of these individuals and ensure that they receive appropriate treatment such as psychiatric medications and support while living in the community. The RICCT teams serve individuals beginning with outreach in the prisons and then through intensive specialized case management following their release to Tulsa County. RICCT staff collaborate with ODMHSAS discharge planners, facility Mental Health Treatment Teams, probation officers and clients to help ensure optimal success. There are two RICCT programs in Tulsa County located in Family and Children's Services. Peers assist with providing transportation to and from court or services; offer support, guidance and perspective; and help create recovery plans with staff members.
- **Operation Direct and Connect** is an annual program operated by the Tulsa Police Department in coordination with community partners to conduct outreach to people who experience chronic homelessness and educate them on behaviors that generate calls to law enforcement, opportunities to connect to same day mental health treatment or detox services and information on outstanding municipal warrants, including connections to a municipal diversionary court. Peers work on teams with police to conduct outreach and connect individuals to services.
- **A Better Way** was created as an opportunity for people experiencing homelessness to earn a day's worth of income by completing daily work projects, such as community beautification assignments, as an alternative to panhandling. Funded by the City of Tulsa and Tulsa Area United Way, and operated by MHAO, a Better Way incorporates peers to offer connections to services in the community such as housing, mental health and substance abuse treatment, as well as more sustainable employment opportunities.
- The **Transitional Employment** program prepares individuals who have mental illnesses and criminal records for the competitive job market and other employment services. Participants are identified while involved in diversion programs. The role of the peer in this program is to use his or her own lived experience to connect with program participants, inspire hope and provide a positive role model during their journey to recovery.

## ***Peers Influencing Local Action***

Peers play an integral role in community planning processes in Tulsa County by offering insight to help the county—and the city and state—create programs and services that are responsive, respectful and effective to address the complex needs of vulnerable residents. Inclusion in these processes can also promote buy-in among individuals with mental illnesses who have been involved in the homelessness or justice systems.

A key part of the county's success is attributed to its ability to break down language barriers between stakeholders, peers and advocates through the utilization of shared terms, which has helped partners communicate and coordinate their efforts better. Peers also contribute their experiences to inform the research and planning process for local policy. For example, peers met with health experts to create the Tulsa Mental Health Plan, which outlines a 10-year strategy to improve the mental health care system for county residents. In addition, peers are involved in Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training, a statewide law enforcement training curriculum offered by ODMHSAS, which helps prepare officers to better identify people experiencing a mental health crisis and connect them to services rather than jail when appropriate. Local leaders strive to continue including the perspectives of some of the county's most vulnerable residents in advocacy work and related efforts.

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