

Past struggles lead to success for COVA peers

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ThisWeek Staff Writer

Prison sentences and mental health struggles don't normally top people's resumes.

But for Doc Hecker and three others, their history of mental health issues and, in some cases, legal trouble has become an asset at the Center of Vocational Alternatives (COVA) in Clintonville.

Nearly two years ago, COVA launched a pilot peer program, employing Hecker, Belinda Spinosi, Beth Pratt and Vicky Vinzant.

Spinosi, Pratt and Vinzant use their experiences with mental illness to coach others looking to enter or re-enter the work force, while Hecker, who has served time in prison, helps prison inmates with mental health issues deal with the challenges they'll face when released, such as finding housing and jobs.

"All my troubled past, it's turned out to be an asset for me. It always used to be a hurdle for me, in finding relationships, in finding employment," Hecker said. "It's kind of like, go with what you know."

In Hecker's job as forensic peer counselor, he goes with another COVA employee to seven different correctional institutions to work with inmates who have been referred by the mental health department and are within months of being released.

They work with program participants on what they need to do to find employment.

"I think, initially, they're overwhelmed," Hecker said. "There's just so many things to do. A lot of people don't have Social Security cards (or) ID."

As a peer, Hecker said he also shares some of his past struggles, and for people who often don't trust a system they feel has betrayed them, his presence helps them trust COVA personnel.

"It's kind of a precarious line between self-disclosing and being professional," Hecker said. "It opens the door for validation."

Hecker said his success shows program participants that they also can be successful.

"They give up on the system and say, 'This is just my lot in life,' " Hecker said. "Anything I can do, you can do also."

As part of COVA's Peer Support Team, Vinzant monitors the center's resource room and helps participants in any way she can to assist in their job searches.

As someone who once used services at COVA, Vinzant said she knows it's best to sit back and see what people need, rather than approaching them as they walk through the door.

"When I come in these situations, I hate to be bombarded," Vinzant said.

Like Hecker, Vinzant said she knows her presence provides those searching for a job with a sense of hope. Vinzant, who worked as a janitor in one of COVA's satellite programs before being hired as part of the peer team, is now taking courses to become a drug and addiction counselor.

"A lot of times, I give them hope that if it hasn't happened today, it will happen," Vinzant said. "It's been a



BY ADAM CAIRNS/THISWEEK

Peer employment supervisors Beth Pratt, left, and Belinda Spinosi assist Louis Hamer as he fills out a job application inside the Center of Vocational Alternatives (COVA) resource center.

great experience for me, and that's what I want to pass along to other people."

The peer program has been so successful at COVA that the center is looking to add more peers to its staff, as funding allows, and is working to put together a forensic peer-training program to teach others to serve as peers.

"Once we started it, it resulted in better client services," said COVA CEO Judy Braun. "They're just able to jump right in and relate to people. There's always that connection of a common experience."

While COVA participants and staff benefit from the peers' experiences, Hecker said those who would participate in the training program would be the ones to benefit, as trained peers become in demand for courts, police departments and hospitals.

At a time when many people are competing for few jobs, Hecker said that opportunity would make a big difference for those with mental health issues and pasts in prison.

"The variety of jobs has been very extensive," Hecker said. "(Peer training programs) actually have employers waiting for their grads."

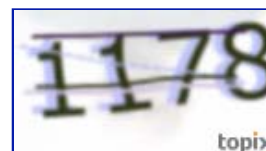
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