

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

I first met Troy Manns at a Mental Health Legislative breakfast many years ago; he was the keynote speaker. Troy is a Peer Support Specialist, certified in Substance Disorders counseling. He is also a person in long term recovery from substance use; he therefore has critically important lived experiences. I introduced myself to him after hearing his inspiring story, and we then met on several other occasions.

When voters first elected me Sheriff in 2014, Troy was the first person to come visit me in my new office. Troy had a vision, and he wanted me to see it, too. Working at the time at Freedom House, he was a liaison to the Orange County Recovery Courts. He kept seeing the same people return to the detention center. He felt certain we could reduce recidivism by providing substance use services to incarcerated people.

Troy was right to come to me. As the Sheriff, I was now responsible for the safety and well-being of every person in Orange County, including those in the detention center and those attempting to adjust to life after incarceration. Obviously, it is in everyone's interest if people can manage this transition without reoffending or resuming harmful substance use. Troy sold me on the importance of meeting people where they are and helping them move to a better place.

With Troy's guidance, my office partnered with the county's Criminal Justice Resource Department (CJRD) and formed Foundations for Hope (F4H). F4H is an evidence-based model utilizing peer support to motivate recovery among inmates at the Orange County Detention Center who have substance use and/or mental health issues. Nationally recognized recovery materials are used to help inmates build their personal toolkits to use during times of stress and temptation. The goal is to equip participants with useful information, strengthen their decision-making skills, and provide them with support so that upon their release they are able to engage positively in the community and eliminate behaviors that could cause a repeat offense.

Allison Zirkel, a licensed clinical social worker and addiction specialist, works with the CJRD. She screens interested male inmates for voluntary participation based on the following criteria: a diagnosed substance use disorder, a demonstrated commitment to recovery, a sentence or period of pretrial detention of more than 60 days, and the recommendation of Detention Center administrators. Since program inception, Ms. Zirkel has referred 53 people to F4H. If space allows, the inmate will ideally reside with other program participants in a designated cell block, and they attend twice weekly recovery group sessions. The program includes problem-solving workshops, wellness recovery training, relapse prevention, positive self-advocacy, motivational

and mindfulness instruction, expressive art therapy, and introduction to outside supports.

The introduction to outside supports is critical. Also known as a warm-handoff, such a practice increases the likelihood that people will follow up on referrals to available services. The barrier to entry is lower when the client already has a connection with someone on staff, knows where the office is, and has a plan to address logistics such as transportation. Reducing this type stress also minimizes the likelihood a program participant will sabotage his own success by finding a reason not to seek the services he so desperately needs.

When a F4H participant is released, he receives a referral to the Josh's Hope Foundation, which offers community supports and assistance with the transition back to community life. Some participants receive vocational training or internship opportunities, and ideally, all will continue in F4H community-based peer recovery support groups. During the post-release period, participants receive up to 12 months of reentry assistance and support. During this time, outcomes are recorded for program evaluation.

Of course, COVID-19 altered service delivery. The detention center housed less people and representatives from outside organizations were not allowed into the facility. Mr. Manns also took a new job with Recovery Communities of North Carolina. Their mission is to promote addiction recovery, wellness and citizenship through advocacy, education, and support. However, he still serves the local community with his participation in the Local Re-entry Council, the Justice Advisory Council, and the Orange County Behavioral Task Force. As F4H gears back up, Troy's influence is still felt in the local recovery community.

I'm glad Troy was the first visitor to my new office. He helped me embrace his vision. We now provide recovery services while a person is in our facility and re-entry assistance when he leaves. These efforts have lasting impacts on the safety and well-being of every member of our community.