

Overdose survivors in Stark get help from TASC team

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TASC workers crucial link between hospitals and addiction treatment.

CANTON The details of Aaron Schreffler's near-fatal drug overdose are fuzzy memories to him almost a year later.

"It was very emotional," Schreffler, 33, of Canton said. "It was my first time I ever overdosed."

He has been sober since January.

"I knew when I came to, that I wasn't doing something right," Schreffler said.

During the three days Schreffler spent at Aultman Hospital, peer supporters from Stark County TASC helped him arrange treatment. When the hospital released Schreffler, peer supporter Kyle Howard was there to get him, an event Schreffler remembered clearly.

"He comes charging in my room," Schreffler said. "I wasn't even awake. He's like, 'OK, let's go to the Crisis Center,' and away we went. I got dressed and we left."



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Aaron Schreffler on TASC peer supporters

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Making connections

For a little more than a year, Stark County TASC's team of four peer supporters has been meeting overdose survivors and other patients in local hospitals with the goal of linking them to drug and alcohol treatment. Peer supporters are individuals who are in recovery from addiction and who have been trained to guide and support others.

"I think that people are starting to recognize that we are here and what we do," said Nicole Osborne, TASC's peer recovery support supervisor.

Over the course of 14 months, the peer supporters made contact with 296 men and women and connected nearly 74 percent of them to treatment. Most of the contacts were at Mercy Medical Center and Aultman Hospital, but in October, peer supporters started staffing Aultman Alliance Community Hospital.

At least one peer supporter is available to respond to a hospital between 8 a.m. and midnight, seven days a week. Staffing is higher during weekdays.

Osborne said the team gets called for overdoses, but also for patients who are hospitalized for infections or other serious health problems related to intravenous drug use or alcohol abuse.

"If they leave the hospital and they don't have a plan, then we've lost them," Osborne said.

Aultman and TASC have built a strong working relationship, said Katie Wright, Aultman's associate vice president of care coordination and utilization management.

"TASC is an excellent resource for our social workers and case managers – we utilize their team for many patients in the emergency department and also in the hospital setting," Wright said.

In addition to linking a person to treatment, peer supporters can help their clients get food, clothing, shelter, a job, an ID and insurance. Transportation is a big part of the job — county funded detox beds are in Massillon and Alliance — and TASC has three other peer supporters who work with clients outside the hospital setting.

Stark County Mental Health and Addiction Recovery has allocated almost \$512,000 in federal 21st Century Cures money over two year for TASC's peer-support efforts.

"We know that when people who are struggling or are in an active addiction, when they are ready for treatment, often that can be a short window," said Allison Esber, Stark MHAR's systems initiative manager.

Into recovery

Not everyone wants treatment, nor is there a guarantee that a client won't relapse, but Osborne said peer supporters demonstrate that another way of life is possible, and sometimes that seed sprouts months later.

Crystal Eakle, 30, of Canton, said she first met a TASC peer supporter two years ago while detoxing at the former Crisis Intervention and Recovery Center detox. The peer supporter gave her a ride to treatment, but she didn't stick with it and ended up in jail and the Stark Regional Community Correction Center.

Eakle reconnected with TASC after her release in August.

"They've just been here to support me," she said. "They've given me rides to work. Take me up to my appointments at (the Regional Center for Detox & Recovery). They've given me vouchers to get clothes... If one person's not there when I need them, you know, it's another one. They'll make sure somebody's there to get me and take me to where I need to be."

Schreffler said Howard, the peer supporter he met at Aultman, helped him get to court hearings, doctor's appointments, parenting classes, 12-step meetings and is someone he can talk to.

"What they do is really life-saving," Schreffler said.

It's a nice thing to hear, Howard said, but "we remind them that we help them save their own lives."

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