Power of peers: A recovery support specialist’s role

Walking into the lobby of ConnectionAZ’s Urgent Psychiatric Center (UPC), you notice something different.

There are men and women in gray scrubs ready to help members in any way they can. They’re helping to fill out paperwork. They’re providing support. Or they’re just talking with members. The goal is to find out what the person needs.

These individuals are recovery support specialists. They’re essential in the recovery process. And they’re especially helpful for members and families in the midst of a psychiatric crisis.

Jeff Schwertfager is the recovery support specialist manager for UPC. He said a recovery support specialist acts as a translator.

“Often times, people feel like they aren’t being heard,” he said. “Once we can validate that, it bridges that connection with the social worker or provider that might not have happened as quickly.”

Recovery support specialists can make this connection because they can meet a person where they are. Because they’ve been there themselves.

“When I’m sitting in front of [a person] and I tell them, ‘Look, I know what you mean,’ they know I’m genuine,” he said. “It’s not empty words.”

Empathy is at the core of a recovery support specialist’s job. They combine empathy with knowledge of the system and community resources. For the member and their loved ones, it means they leave with a much better understanding of what happens next.

At UPC, recovery support specialists are used everywhere. You can find them in the lobby. They’re in the observation unit. You can also find them on the inpatient unit. The role of the recovery support specialist has grown at UPC. That’s because UPC recognized the value and need of what they’re accomplishing.

Recovery support specialists are paired with a provider and social worker. They provide support through the assessment process. They can add resources into a treatment plan. They can advocate for what the member needs or wants.

Schwertfager supports the many different things that may help someone recover, such as music, art or exercise. He does this by encouraging recovery support specialists to be creative.

“If you have a good idea, let’s try it,” he says.

Seeing how the recovery support specialist’s role has grown at UPC shows that empathy, resourcefulness and creativity make a difference. Meeting a person where they’re at and helping find solutions for recovery are key steps in the recovery process. These UPC team members truly show the heart of the program.
Mercy 360 Community kicks off with Maryvale school garden

Pueblo del Sol Elementary School students, teachers and volunteers transformed the school yard on March 24 with a new community garden.

It all started when the kids in Sarah Isaac’s 3rd grade class had an assignment. They were asked, “What can you do to make your community better?” Their answer: a community garden. They had the idea, but didn’t have the funds. So when we heard about the need, we sprang into action.

As part of the Mercy 360 Community effort, we’re teaming up with Valley of the Sun United Way and other local partners to fund community gardens in the Maryvale area. Pueblo del Sol is the first one and two more will soon follow.

Mercy 360 Community is part of our community reinvestment plan. We’re investing in “social determinants” of health - like how we work, live and play -- to improve quality of life for people in our community. The program is mainly focused on the Maryvale area and has three main goals:

• Improve access to care
• Enhance food security
• Expand housing options

At Pueblo del Sol, Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton, Phoenix Police officers, state Rep. Tony Navarrete and dozens of students and volunteers joined the effort. By noon, the garden beds were built. The fruits and vegetables were planted. And the tired students began looking forward to sharing their first harvest.

“We’re going to start gardening classes for our parents, so we can sustain it and have fruits and vegetables for our families year-round,” Isaac said.

Pueblo del Sol Principal Armando Chavez added, “We would like the garden be a place where the community will come. They can take vegetables from the garden and take them into the community.”

Community gardens reduce food insecurity and increase financial stability. They improve access to healthy food. Gardens also have been shown to increase physical activity and create safer neighborhoods.

At Pueblo del Sol, the garden has also become a valuable teaching tool, from biology to math to social studies.

“It’s about the students’ learning,” Chavez said. “That was the concept from the beginning.”

What started as a classroom lesson has turned into a community alliance.

“Today we came together to reach a common goal,” said Monica Snyder, head of clinical operations at Mercy Maricopa. “The partnership between Mercy Care Plan, Mercy Maricopa, along with Valley of the Sun United Way and Pueblo del Sol, is an example of combining public and private resources to make sure our communities are stronger, healthier and addressing issues at the most basic level.”

Heat is coming: How to keep your cool during summer

When outdoors

• Wear sunscreen with a minimum SPF 15. Apply at least 30 minutes before going outside.
• Rest frequently in shady areas so that the body’s temperature has a chance to recover.
• If unaccustomed to working or exercising in a hot environment, gradually increase the pace and limit exercise or work time.
• Wear lightweight, loose-fitting clothing; sunglasses to protect your eyes; and a wide-brimmed hat to provide shade and keep your head cool.
• Take special precaution with infants and young children by dressing them in loose, cool clothing and shading their heads and faces with hats or an umbrella.

To avoid heat-related illness

• Never leave children or pets inside a parked vehicle, even if the windows are open.
• Drink water. Carry water with you. Drink even if you don’t feel thirsty.
• Avoid alcohol and caffeine or large amounts of sugar. They can dehydrate you.
• Slow down. Try to avoid strenuous activity. If you must be very active, try doing so during the coolest part of the day, from about 4 p.m. to 7 a.m.
• Stay indoors whenever possible. If air conditioning is not available, put shades over windows and use cross-ventilation and fans to cool rooms. Go to a public, air-conditioned place during the hottest parts of the day.
• Take a cool shower or bath.
• Check on your friends and neighbors. Ask someone to check on you, too.
• Some medications may increase the risk of heat-related illness. Talk to your doctor.

Symptoms of heat-related illness

• Thirst. By the time you feel thirsty, you are already mildly dehydrated.
• Muscle cramps. You can feel muscle pain or spasms in your abdomen or legs.
• Heat exhaustion. Symptoms include: Cool, moist, red, flushed or pale skin; headache; dizziness and weakness or exhaustion; nausea or vomiting.
• Heat stroke. Symptoms include: Vomiting; confusion; throbbing headache; decreased alertness or loss of consciousness; rapid, weak pulse; rapid, shallow breathing; high body temperature.

If you are having a heat-related medical emergency, call 9-1-1 or your local emergency number for assistance.
Mercy Maricopa honored six people and providers with a RISE Award on April 20. We picked these winners because of their work to improve the lives of others. They help make the behavioral health care system better.

The celebration took place at the Phoenix Airport Marriott. These are the winners in each category:

**Leadership and Advocacy**
- Youth: Sarah (Cheyenne) Runnerstorm
- Adult: Thomas Hutchinson
- Provider: Crisis Response Network

**Health and Wellness**
- Youth: Gabriel Maytorena
- Adult: Gayle Martin
- Provider: Dr. Robin Blitz

The RISE Lifetime Achievement Award went to Gary Brennan. He’s the former CEO of Touchstone Health Services. Gary has spent more than 30 years improving in Arizona’s behavioral health system. He is an innovative leader and set the standard for quality services for children and families.

Gary was at the helm of the Quality Care Network for many years, and he served thousands of families. He launched therapeutic foster care programs and pioneered high-need case management for children. Gary also has paved the way for integrated care, treating the mind and body together. We’re proud to honor him.

Mercy Maricopa’s Board of Directors created the RISE Awards in 2015. The goal was to spotlight the hard work of many in our community. That’s why RISE stands for Resilience, Innovation, Service and Empowerment.

This was the third year that Mercy Maricopa has asked people for award nominations. The community response is always wonderful. People tell us about caregivers, clients, family members and advocates doing amazing work. They come from a variety of organizations with diverse backgrounds.

These people were nominated for the 2017 RISE Award:

- **Individual – Transition-Age Youth**
  - Health and Wellness
    - Gabriel Maytorena
  - Leadership and Advocacy
    - Sarah (Cheyenne) Runnerstorm

- **Individual – Adult**
  - Health and Wellness
    - Erin Dalley
    - Judith Hunderup
    - Gayle Martin
    - Dr. Beverly Wohlert
  - Leadership and Advocacy
    - Gloria Abril
    - Eddie Almberg
    - Andy Am-nowitz
    - Layla Bishop Hubbard
    - Mary Brooks
    - Lori Cairns
    - Christina Fabian Roman
    - Beatriz Fuentes
    - Erica Canados
    - Barb Garden
    - Kellie Guerriero
    - Vanessa Holt
    - Lila Hunyady
    - Thomas Hutchinson
    - Faith Krotz
    - Isabel Regalado
    - Everette Richardson
    - Gail Salentes
    - Brad Speck
    - Dr. Beverly Wohlert

- **Provider**
  - Health and Wellness
    - Dr. Robin Blitz, Phoenix Children’s Hospital
    - Shannon McDermott, Touchstone
  - Leadership and Advocacy
    - Dr. Diana Davis-Willson, Hope Group, LLC
    - Deborah Ekstrom, Terra Vida
    - Frances Miranda, Home Assist Health
    - Crisis Response Network

Narcan is a life-saving drug that can reverse an overdose temporarily until the person can be treated. If you or a friend or family member are using these medications, ask your doctor to prescribe Narcan nasal spray and talk to you about when and how to use it. You could save a life!

**Treating pain safely, with and without opioids**

By Elisa S. Mashal, M.D.

Perocet, Vicodin, Morphine. Oxycodeone. These are just a few of the opioid medicines you may have been prescribed after having a tooth pulled, spraining your ankle or having minor surgery.

Two people die in the U.S. by accident every hour from prescription opioids (narcotic pain medicines). Most of these are people taking other people’s medicine. Besides the real risk of addiction from these drugs, if you take too much, you could stop breathing and die. The highest risk of overdose is in the first 24 to 48 hours. Taking them with alcohol or medicines for anxiety (like Valium, Ativan or Xanax) can increase the risk of death.

Prescription pain killers are cousins of heroin; in fact, 80% of people who use heroin started with prescription pills. New information just came out from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that tells us it only takes four to five days to become hooked on pain medicine. The risk goes up every day after that.

When we see a doctor for pain, we want relief. Does relief mean zero pain? No. Pain is our body’s way of telling us something is wrong. It’s important for your doctor to find out what the problem is and treat it, so things don’t get worse. Not all pain is treated the same way. Just like you need different antibiotics for different kinds of infections, different medicines treat different kinds of pain.

A combination of ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil) and acetaminophen (Tylenol) has actually been proven to work much better for pain that just recently started. These over-the-counter pain relievers also work better than narcotic pain medicine for pain after minor surgery and kidney stones. For pain that has been going on a long time (chronic), your doctor can prescribe other medicines or treatments that work much better than opioids and will not cause addiction.

What if you do get opioids and have leftover medicine after your pain goes away? Do you have teenagers in the house? Someone who comes to do home repairs? It’s not uncommon for people to go through other people’s medicine cabinets looking for these drugs. It’s extremely important to dispose of any leftovers immediately. Go to www.acpa.net/arizona_drug_disposal_locations.aspx for a map of disposal sites all across Arizona.

If you think you may be addicted, the good news is there are many places to go for help. It’s important that you talk with your clinical team or provider about this. You can find providers on our website at www.mercymaricopa.org/find-provider. You can also check https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help and substanceabuse.gov/.

**Breathing healthy, breathing easier**

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, or COPD, refers to lung diseases. Health care providers use COPD to describe different types of lung diseases. Some of those are emphysema, bronchitis and asthma.

COPD can make it harder and harder for someone to breathe. Many people think that having a hard time breathing or coughing a lot is just part of getting older. That isn’t always the case. In the early stages of COPD, you may not feel bad. COPD can develop over many years. COPD affects about 30 million people in the U.S. And over half of them don’t know they have the disease.

You can ask your doctor about getting a test that checks the health of your lungs. Early screening can identify COPD before you have major problems. That’s why it’s important that you talk to your doctor as soon as you notice any symptoms.

Some of the signs of COPD are:
- Increased breathlessness
- Coughing often (with and without spit)
- Wheezing
- A tight feeling in your chest

You can learn more about COPD from the COPD Foundation at www.copdfoundation.org. You can also visit the American Lung Association at www.lung.org.

We’re also here to answer your questions and connect you to care. Mercy Maricopa Member Services is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Call us at 602-586-1841 or 1-800-564-5465 (TTY/DDT) 711.

Mercy Maricopa members with a serious mental illness (SMI) diagnosis can ask to talk with a nurse about any health issues on their mind. The Nurse Line is available Monday-Friday, 6 p.m. to 7 a.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 24 hours.
Health briefs

Ways to stay heart healthy
Living with heart disease can be difficult. Don't let it get you down! We're here to help you stay healthy and stay out of the hospital. Taking care of yourself keeps you from getting sick and helps you feel better.

Some good examples of how to care for yourself include:

- Make and keep your appointments with your Primary Care Provider (PCP)
- Take your medications as prescribed
- Eat a healthy diet with reduced salt intake
- Weigh yourself regularly and notify your doctor of any unusual weight gain
- Make and keep your appointments with your Primary Care Provider (PCP)
- Take your medications as prescribed
- Eat a healthy diet
- Get some exercise every day

You can learn more by reading your Member Handbook. You can also call Mercy Maricopa Member Services at 602-586-1841 or 1-800-564-5465 (TTY/TTD 711) for a copy of your handbook, to find out who your PCP is or to select a new PCP. We're here to help 24/7. You can also search for providers on our website at www.mercymaricopa.org/find-provider.

Keeping diabetes under control
If you have diabetes, you can still have a healthy life. We have some tips that can keep your diabetes under control. This will help prevent you from worrying about your diabetes.

One way to take good care of yourself is to keep track of your long-term glucose levels. This is called an A1C blood test and your doctor can order it for you. Other ways include:

- Make and keep your appointments with your Primary Care Provider (PCP)
- Take your medications as prescribed
- Eat a healthy diet
- Get some exercise every day

You can learn more by reading your Member Handbook. You can also call Mercy Maricopa Member Services at 602-586-1841 or 1-800-564-5465 (TTY/TTD 711) for a copy of your handbook, to find out who your PCP is or to select a new PCP. We're here to help 24/7. You can also search for providers on our website at www.mercymaricopa.org/find-provider.

Former Marine making a difference for members

Arizona native Miguel Cota is a truly a man behind the scenes.

Cota is a senior business analyst for Mercy Maricopa's operations department and keeps track of the provider network. He works to make sure there are enough providers - and the right kind - to care for Mercy Maricopa members. He helps educate and monitor providers and the data that they're required to submit. So although he doesn't usually meet members, his efforts directly impact every member.

Cota joined Mercy Maricopa about a year ago. Before that, he worked with the Kyrene School District.

He is a 16-year veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps. In the military, Cota gained valuable training in many fields. He served throughout the world, including two tours of duty in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom Afghanistan. His list of medals and awards is long. It includes the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal with 1 Gold Star, Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, Good Conduct Medal with 1 Silver Star, Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal and many, many more.

Cota is rightfully proud of his service. It prepared him for his work at Mercy Maricopa.

"The military prepared me in many ways to become a sound and effective leader, team member and individual," he said. "As a Marine, we take pride in ourselves and our 14 leadership traits. Those traits are drilled into us from the day we step onto those yellow footsteps."

Although Cota is relatively new to Mercy Maricopa, his skills and dedication have already shown bright. And his motto, “Never take no for an answer” has already earned him two Star Awards from the company. He was also nominated for a special award. It’s called the REMEMBER Kate Aurelius Award and it honors those going above and beyond for members.

“I had to learn a field and processes that were completely new to me,” he said. “But I came in with the courage and initiative to make a difference.”

Part of Cota’s dedication to Mercy Maricopa’s mission comes from his personal life. His youngest son has Asperger’s syndrome. Cota understands the support and care needed for children dealing with behavioral health issues.

Cota recently got remarried. He enjoys spending time with his wife, their four children and two dogs. He is also an avid adventurer. Cota enjoys the outdoors, fishing, camping or just hitting the road with no destination in mind.

Events calendar

**MAY**

**Symposium: Families Breaking Through the Wall of Addiction**
Join Marc Community Resources and learn about substance abuse and mental illness from a family member’s perspective. Also, find out more about resources available to you. Registration is required.
Saturday, May 13
9 a.m. to 12 p.m.
Marc Community Resources
934 N. Country Club Dr., Mesa
dawn.mcreynolds@marccr.com or cheryl.calvert@marccr.com to register

**Crisis Engagement Collaboration for Family Members**
Marc Community Resources offer a 4-hour training on how to help prevent future crisis situations through positive redirection and verbal intervention. Registration is required.
Saturday, May 20
9 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Marc Community Resources
934 N. Country Club Dr., Mesa
dawn.mcreynolds@marccr.com or cheryl.calvert@marccr.com to register

**Foster, Adoptive and Kinship Training: Complex Trauma**
Mercy Maricopa training designed to give foster, adoptive and kinship caregivers the tools they need to support and nurture the children and youth in their care. Certificates of attendance for two credit hours provided.
Tuesday, May 23
6 to 8 p.m.
Family Involvement Center
5333 N. 7th St., Ste. A-100, Phoenix
dcs@mercymaricopa.org or 602-414-7575 to register

**Youth Mental Health First Aid Training**
Designed to teach parents, family, caregivers, teachers, school staff, peers, neighbors, health workers and others how to help adolescents (12-18) experiencing mental health challenges. This is a 2-day course and you must attend both days (May 23-24) to receive the certificate.
Tuesday, May 23 and Wednesday, May 24
9 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Sunrise Mountain Library
2110 N. 8th Ave, Peoria
michelles@mikid.org or 480-262-4391 to register

**2017 Mental Health America of Arizona SEEDS Conference**
Join us to learn about the behavioral health services available to children and youth in foster and adoptive care. Foster, adoptive, kinship and group home caregivers are welcome. Dinner and Spanish interpreter provided. No cost to attend. A certificate of attendance will be provided at the end of class.
Thursday, May 11
6 to 8 p.m.
Family Involvement Center
1337 N. 7th St., Ste. A-100, Phoenix
602-414-7575

**Mental Health Awareness Coalition Meeting**
All community members are welcome. Join the discussion about public education to increase understanding, awareness and acceptance of mental health issues in the community and working to reduce stigma and discrimination. Confirm meeting date/time at email listed below.
Wednesday, May 17
10 to 11 a.m.
Arizona Behavioral Health Corp.
1401N. 2nd St., Phoenix
info@azmhac.org

**Child and Family Advisory Partnership Community Meeting**
Get connected to the support you need to raise a child with emotional, physical and/or behavioral health needs. Dinner, Spanish interpretation and child watch provided. No cost to attend.
Wednesday, June 28
5:30 to 7:30 p.m.
Family Involvement Center
5333 N. 7th St., Ste. A-100, Phoenix
602-288-0155 to pre-register

**Arizona Foster and Adoptive Family Forum**
Get connected to the support you need to raise a child with emotional, physical and/or behavioral health needs. Dinner, Spanish interpretation and child watch provided. No cost to attend.
Wednesday, June 28
5:30 to 7:30 p.m.
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For the most current events listing, visit mercymaricopa.org/events.