

Summary Statement

My name is Carlene Deal-Smith. I am a Native American Woman of the Navajo Tribe, Master Weaver, and also a recovering alcoholic. I was addicted to alcohol for 20 years and am now 17 years sober. This would not be possible if it weren't for the places I have worked.

I believe Peer Support is crucial to the success of people in addiction who desire recovery. Peer Support Specialists at Presbyterian Medical Services' Totah Behavioral Health Authority program call our clients "relatives" because that's truly the capacity in which we relate to them. Being able to connect to the relatives both through our shared heritage and shared struggles with addiction has allowed me to function as a bridge between them, the staff, and the community. This work has enabled me to be effective as a community support worker and mentor. Most importantly, I am living proof that recovery can happen.

In my opinion, increased funding is essential to help overcome the barriers that prevent addicted individuals from accessing peer support services as well as those in recovery from obtaining peer support status. I completely support the bill introduced by Congressmen Luján and Johnson.

My name is Carlene Deal-Smith. I am a Native American Woman of the Navajo Tribe, Master Weaver, and also a recovering alcoholic. I have struggled with my addiction for 20 years and I am 17 years sober. This would not be possible if it weren't for the places I have worked.

I have worked with Substance Abuse Programs for 25 years and I have been employed with Presbyterian Medical Services through their Totah Behavioral Health Authority program for 14 years, 9 months. This program provides services to homeless addicted individuals seeking a better life. Services provided include counseling, Traditional Dine' (Navajo) healing practices, sobering house services, and dormitory housing. I have experienced similar struggles with addiction and homelessness. My past gives me a better understanding of how to approach the specific needs of this population. Not only am I gratified by the services I am able to provide to my relatives (clients) that have substance abuse problems, working as a peer supporter is my way of staying sober myself. I am humbled by their struggles and I see hope for a better tomorrow for them.

Every day on my way to work, I pray to my Creator to give me guidance and ask for the right thing to say to the Joint Intervention Program (JIP) relatives that I work with who suffer from substance abuse orders. Once I get to work, my relatives and I talk about how they can use what they are learning in JIP to get through another day clean and sober. Because I am clean and sober, my experience helps show them it is possible. The relatives in JIP do not know how to cope without their substances. Every day is a struggle for them. I have to listen to them and be present with them in their struggle to hear their pain. I am with the relatives 40 hours a week. Another valuable service I provide at Totah is communicating with staff who do not have a lived experience of substance use disorder to help explain the relatives' struggles on that particular day. In this way I serve as an important intermediary for the relatives and the other behavioral health providers to improve services and outcomes.

I believe Peer Support works because I see the miracles happening each day that I am working with the relatives. Some days are harder than others. For so many people in recovery, simply getting through another day is a big accomplishment. For me, being present with them during this process is a big plus. Being their voice is a big part of their accomplishment, because their addiction has beaten them down so much, they don't like themselves anymore. Every day the JIP relatives are given a daily affirmation and use that throughout the day, to give them something positive to hang on to all day. The longer they are in the program, the more you hear them start to write their own positive affirmations. You can see their self-esteem and self-worth come back. You hear it in their voice; they start to matter again. You see by their appearance that they are taking care of themselves. They want to see how they are doing physically; they want to get an annual physical to see what alcohol has done to them. And most times, they can do something about their wellbeing and they start working on getting healthy.

I'd like to also point out that peer support programs offer more than just support to people in recovery – they offer jobs to people in recovery. When you are in your addiction, and even into recovery, you find yourself feeling “less than”. Employment and independence help you feel like you are a part of the world and that you matter. Trying to find a job and transportation are extremely difficult, especially for those of us who have a history of substance use disorder. However, peer support programs make employment possible. I earned my relevant job experience with a lot of struggle and hard work. It makes me proud to be able to turn that struggle into a career that allows me to support myself and help other people recover.

Most of the relatives that we work with are people who are hurt and lost. We give them a safe place to be whole again, mentally, physically, emotionally, financially and spiritually. Like it has for me, peer support also provides them a career choice to aspire to and give back. I am thankful for Presbyterian Medical Services and the opportunities they have provided to me and to our peers.

In my opinion, increased funding for Peer Support is essential to help overcome barriers that prevent addicted individuals from accessing peer support services as well as those in recovery from obtaining peer support status. I completely support the bill introduced by Congressmen Luján and Johnson.