

CASE STUDY:

Program Creates Positive Change for Women in At-Risk Situations

Creativity and teamwork inspire the path to healing



SITUATION

Women living in the New Haven area who are homeless, suffering from addiction or living with violence may not know where to go for help in trying to turn their lives around. Poverty and other barriers to care such as a lack of transportation often prevent these women from seeking treatment and so they remain in risky or unhealthy environments.

Many of these same women are also dealing with complex, multiple issues for which a one-hour a week traditional therapy session isn't enough. Such traditional treatment often leaves these women with an excessive amount of time on their hands, which can become a breeding ground for boredom and depression, allowing the potential to slip back into habits they are trying to break.

A program needed to be developed to help those for whom traditional therapy alone will not work. It needed to be comprehensive, integrating several services in one specific area, to accommodate those who cannot travel easily or safely, to ensure that they keep coming back. A safe, nurturing environment would also be essential for women suffering from trauma.

SOLUTION

The Village of POWER, a program for women offered at the Cornell Scott-Hill Health Center, was funded through the SAMHSA (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration) grant in 2003. Currently, the Village of POWER employs four staff members, a Clinical Director, two Case managers and an employment coordinator, who serve approximately thirty patients per day.

The program has two core features. First it offers women a safe place to go, an important component because 90% of the women who come to the Village of POWER have suffered some type of trauma (usually caused by men). Second, it uses creativity to help women who are recovering from substance abuse and trauma, including domestic violence, homelessness, mental illness and incarceration, actualize their potential.

Newcomers are assessed as to what their probable creative outlets may be (jewelry making, sewing, quilting, crocheting, etc.) and are encouraged in those directions. These creative outlets are then used to ease women into opening up and sharing their stories when it's comfortable for them to do so. Because of the high percentage of women suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, asking them to talk about their experiences before they are ready may re-activate the trauma memories, creating a craving to self-medicate. When the women begin to show signs of comfort and safety within the program, the process of therapy with a clinician is introduced.

The duration of a woman's stay at the Village of POWER is individualized and is based upon her needs. The initial steps a case manager takes with incoming clients includes helping

them obtain insurance, getting them to safe housing and out of high-risk substance abuse scenarios and working on their legal situations (like probation).

Clients attend both individual and group therapy sessions that include Relapse Prevention, Emotions Management, Job Readiness, Spirituality Group and Life Balance. Community meetings are also held twice a week. Here, women share their accomplishments, are introduced to resources available to help them and develop problem solving skills and social support systems.

Peer mentors are often involved in the group sessions and serve as symbols of success and inspiration. These are women who at one time were part of the Village of POWER, enduring the same struggles as those currently in the program, and were able to transform their lives. They offer support in various ways, including taking women in the community to church, AA or NA meetings. They foster hope that keeps women coming back.

Growing Through Sewing, a daily program funded by the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, is a widely successful program at Village of POWER. Vivian Fripp Elbert, Employment Coordinator, heads the program which has been in existence for the past five years. Women are taught how to make scarves, bags, clothing, quilts and other apparel. Several women have unlocked talents they never knew they had, giving them a sense of self-worth and self-pride, which makes them less likely to fall back into harmful behavioral patterns or situations.

Some items that are made in the *Growing Through Sewing* program, in addition to jewelry and other crafts made by the women, are then sold at fundraisers. The majority of the money raised from these events goes directly towards the women for necessities like bus tokens and housing expenses.

Women are shown that the craft skills learned and developed at the Village of POWER can be applied to various life situations. For example, the patience that is learned with making crafts, allows women to calmly think decisions through as opposed to just reacting. It also helps clear their minds and focus on something enjoyable to them rather than the issues they may be facing outside the doors of the Village of POWER.

The Village of POWER offers a seamless, integrated, “no barriers” approach to healing. By offering several services in one building such as medical care, HIV testing/counseling and child guidance, the client retention rate is higher than if the services were spread out over different locations. Women are more likely to take an elevator to the next floor to see their clinician rather than take a bus across town.

RESULTS

In 2008, a 6-month follow-up of the 5-year evaluation from the SAMSHA grant found extraordinary statistical outcomes. The Village of POWER saw an average of 30 women a day (150 a year; 750 over 5 years) with an 80% retention rate. Other results found that 50% had permanent housing, 45% were employed or enrolled in education, and nearly 100% of women had reduced or no involvement in criminal activity. There was also a 95% rate of change in reduced or no alcohol or illegal drug use.

With multiple therapeutic channels in constant communication with one another, a client is more likely to see positive behavioral results. For example, if a client misses a therapy session, the Village of POWER is notified and encourages the client to see their therapist. One client was on the verge of being discharged for repeated absences with her clinician. It was suggested to the client, through the Village of POWER, that her clinician had always wanted to learn how to crochet and that she should teach him the skills. Teaching her therapist how to crochet gave her a sense of self-worth and a feeling that she had something to offer.

From that point on, she was not only enthusiastic about going to her meetings, but she went regularly.

Earning small sums of money through the fundraisers also helps the women feel a sense of pride and accomplishment in themselves. The encouragement the women get by selling their products boosts their confidence and encourages them to stay on the path to healing.

The Village of POWER opens doors and provides new avenues for women to find work. One client said, "I'm a smart woman, I have a business degree. But I went through some hard times and because of it, there are black marks on my record. In this job market, it's hard for most people to find a job. It's even harder when your past is scattered with some kind of 'red flag.' The Village of POWER is allowing me to use my skills to not only help get myself back on my feet, but to help other women, too."

Another client who joined the Village of POWER and enrolled in its recovery program, *Growing Through Sewing*, was initially homeless, unemployed and depressed. Since enrolling she found housing and supportive therapy, created a social support system and developed skills in sewing, marketing, and customer service. Sewing helped increase her self-esteem and self-confidence to the point that she was able to apply for and obtain a job, the first one she had in a year. Also, she is taking orders for quilts and is hoping to open a small quilting business. It's highly likely she will obtain that goal. Many women have gone on to form their own businesses from the skills they learned at Village of POWER. Several have learned business and entrepreneurial skills and developed their own line of jewelry and clothing, including online stores.

The SAMSHA grant expired in 2008 and because of the shortage of funding now, the Village of POWER relies heavily upon the consideration of others for donations of beads, fabric, and other art supplies. Fundraisers are often advertised throughout the community by word of mouth.

The program is open Monday-Friday from 9-5 on 226 Dixwell Avenue. No appointments are necessary.