

Congratulations to the 2008 Peer Advocates!

On June 3, 2008, 18 people successfully completed the 11th annual Co-Occurring Disorder (COD) Peer Advocate Program, under the joint leadership of Public Health's Alcohol and Drug Program Administration (ADPA) and the Department of Mental Health (DMH).

Participants in the program all suffer from a combination of mental health disorders and substance abuse problems. They hurdle many obstacles on the way to recovery, as they are part of a population that is often overlooked and underserved. When they do receive help, they often find trouble fitting in with other people who are treated for only one behavioral condition. The Peer Advocate training program allows participants with co-occurring disorders to regain control over their lives and their recovery process.

Program graduates complete rigorous training which consists of 164 classroom hours with courses such as neurobiology, HIV/AIDS training and prevention, COD adolescent treatment, communicable diseases, and engagement of families and significant others. This curriculum was designed to prepare graduates for work in alcohol and drug rehabilitative treatment, and/or mental health facilities. In addition to classroom work, participants also complete 400 hours of field practicum, through on-site training in a residential recovery center and/or an outpatient mental health center.

Upon completion of the COD Peer Advocate training, graduates demonstrate knowledge of basic counseling and substance rehabilitation principles, practices, and techniques. Field coursework allows program participants to "interview" for entry-level employment with treatment programs while on the job. These programs are often run by County-contracted providers and sponsors of the Peer Advocate Program (see list below). Peer Advocates work as part of a multi-disciplinary team, and perform a variety of supportive services including advocacy, case management, and referrals to community resources.

Employing a Peer Advocate in such programs enhances the empathy of staff, and helps decrease the stigma that many in the community might feel towards those who are recovering or have recovered from mental health and substance abuse disorders. Peer Advocates promote insight into these disorders by actively demonstrating what makes recovery possible. It also exposes staff and others to stabilized individuals who are able to function well with co-occurring disorders.

Instructors for the COD Peer Advocate Program include Dr. Joycelyn Whiten of ADPA, and Dr. Verda Bradley of DMH. ADPA Acting Director Wayne K. Sugita conceptualized the project more than a decade ago, and it has been working with the Department of Mental Health ever since.

Participating Agencies:

Augustus F. Hawkins MHC
BHS Hollywood
Bimini House
Compton MHC
CRI-Help
Didi Hirsch
Exodus Recovery Center
La Cada
Long Beach Mental Health Center
Rio Hondo Mental Health Center
San Pedro MHC
Social Model Recovery
Telecare La Casa MHC
The Village Wellness Center
West Central MHC