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At Hands Across Long Island, Peers Follow People from Prison to the Community

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Hands Across Long Island, a peer-run organization that has been operating for more than 21 years, supports people with severe and persistent mental illness in the criminal justice system.

It is not easy for mental health providers to gain access to the criminal justice system, given safety concerns. New York State has led the way to a solution by providing mental health services in a separate unit of Sing Sing Prison in Ossining. HALI has been part of this program since 2002, in addition to working in the county jail. The goals of this program are to prepare inmates for the changes that have taken place in the community since their incarceration; develop their interview skills with respect to parole, housing, and other practitioners; and develop new coping skills to help them remain in the community. It is imperative that inmates understand that the coping skills they've acquired in prison or jail will not be an asset to them in the community.

Because HALI staff have “been there, done that” and work with inmates for 3 months, they develop positive, trusting relationships. Next, staff help to bridge inmates from prison to the community. Staff meet inmates at the gate on the day of release and accompany them to parole and a meeting with their case manager and then to a shelter for the evening. To date, no housing programs have been developed to accept inmates on release; therefore, shelters are necessary for approximately 2 weeks to verify homelessness. To facilitate the transition to the community, staff continue working with a participant for another three months.

A drop-in center was developed to offer support to those people who have completed the program and want continued support. The center is open on “reporting day,” just around the corner from parole. If someone has dropped off the radar, chances are that they can be found at parole on their reporting day. The center also provides a place where people can touch base with the staff who worked with them in prison and with whom they have a relationship. This center required permission of the Parole Department to allow felons to congregate as most fel-

ons are prohibited from being with other felons.

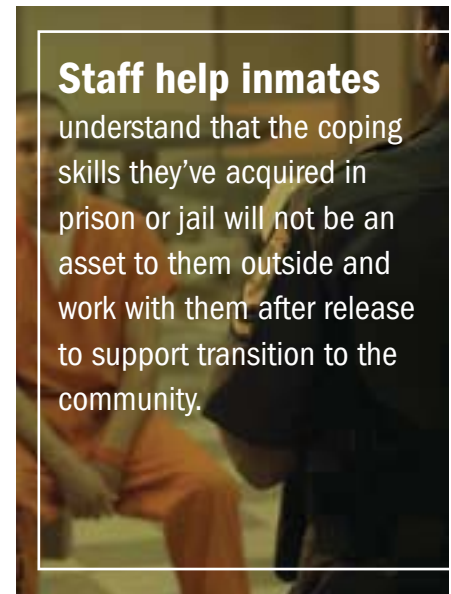
The New York State Office of Mental Health has reported that since the inception of these services, the recidivism rate has dropped significantly.

On Long Island, HALI recognized the needs of people being released to the county from prison and from the local jail. In collaboration with the Suffolk County Re-Entry Task Force, HALI developed a Re-Entry House Pilot project to fill a major gap in the recovery process – housing.

With a grant from the Department of Criminal Justice and HALI funds, we were able to create an intensive program and establish housing. We can accommodate four people at any given time. Attached to the house is a studio apartment in which a staff person resides and provides emergency response for the residents. We help people develop routines and attitudes helpful for community integration.

The program initially provides intensive supervision and then lifts restrictions as appropriate. Staff arrive at the house every morning, inspect the house, and make sure residents are ready before they are transported to their program or appointments. By 3:30 pm, residents are picked up from their work and brought back to the house where they have time for dinner and chores before they head out for a community-based 12-step program (AA or NA). Staff stay with them through the meeting to coach them to participate, meet people, and integrate into the community. They typically return to the house around 10:00 pm. On weekends, staff accompany residents to the grocery store and other errands, and residents participate in some form of exercise and recreation. The goal is to teach the residents how to live a full life in recovery. For many, this is an exhausting process – life in jail or prison is certainly not filled with activity.

When the staff and the resident together feel that he or she is ready to have more responsibility, unsupervised activities are planned that also take into consideration conditions of parole or probation. During this phase, the resident is given more and more



Staff help inmates understand that the coping skills they've acquired in prison or jail will not be an asset to them outside and work with them after release to support transition to the community.

freedoms with frequent drug testing, verification of planned activities, and so forth. In addition, planning is done for after the resident graduates from the program. Applications for housing programs, employment programs, recovery programs, and the like are prepared and submitted to the appropriate agencies. Although providers, employers, and schools may be hesitant to accept a parolee's application, a graduation certificate from the re-entry program provides supporting documentation that attests to the person's efforts to change his or her life. HALI can also directly communicate with providers to help with their acceptance of the parolee.

People with mental illness require intense assistance to succeed in returning to the community from prison. HALI gives them the opportunity to live on the outside with others who have done the same and not only survived but created a life worth living. Twenty-eight people from Sing Sing and Suffolk County Jail have crossed our threshold. Of these, 22 are employed or going to school, have reunited with their family, have started a family of their own, or live independently or in a supported housing program – their names line the wall at the re-entry house to give hope to newcomers.