

Allegheny County Coalition for Recovery,
Collaborative for Recovery Dialogue
POLICE TRIALOGUE

With Wesley Family Services, Family Services of Western Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh Organization of Women in Early Recovery (POWER) and Pittsburgh Officers from Zone 5

Pittsburgh, PA
September 28, 2017

In attendance were 16 participants: 7 persons in recovery services, 5 police officers, and 4 staff of the various agencies. There were three nonparticipating observers.

Facilitators: Charlene Saner and Marcie Sturgeon-Rusiewicz

Summary writer: Meg Park. Responses are presented as far as possible in a verbatim style with the utmost respect for individuals and accuracy.

Question 1: Share how your experiences have been with each other in general and with individuals.

Persons in recovery They have been good and bad. Sometimes the officer may not know what you're dealing with. It might be a mental health issue or a criminal issue or vice versa. The officer needs to be fluid.

Police officer Can you explain what you meant by the need to be fluid? Is it the difference between being authoritative and being more listening? That is a difficult call.

Person in recovery It is a matter of socialization. That should be a skill of all professionals. Sometimes things cannot be followed up on [criminally].

Police officer: There are different levels of experience for socialization. There needs to be a two-way street in communication.

Person in recovery Best thing you could do is comfort them no matter how crazy they seem—like mania. Say, "We're here for you"--because that person is already stressed. Tell us you're going to take us to the hospital so we can get help and feel better.

Police officer We are taught to not say we are going to take you to the hospital. Another officer said, it is very difficult to get that balance of safety and comfort and include the concerns for public safety.

Person in recovery If a person is being manic or having hissy fit I can understand how difficult it must be. There was a situation with police and my

son. He was in the car with a friend and the friend had stolen the car but my son didn't know that. He was just there. The cops started chasing them. My son got scared and he started to run too. But he stopped.

Police officer We try to get another person involved to help. Like if someone is throwing furniture we try to get from them the name of a friend or family member. We have procedures though. We have to use handcuffs, its procedure.

Person in recovery Why do you have to use handcuffs?

Police officer Handcuffs are for their safety too. It isn't just for us. It is for them or somebody else. We have to do that if we put someone in the patrol car. Its procedure.

Provider staff: Whenever the police are coming to our halfway house—whether it's to take someone to court or they have a warrant—I tell the police I'd like to them to come back later. It's a halfway house. It's never a good time to add that stress to someone's recovery. We know there are judicial issues but the timing is bad.

Police officer I'm also a family member of a person with a mental illness. Having patience is very important for the officer. The person may need to vent—blow off steam—and then they can be able to communicate. We should have these things (dialogues) more so that officers can become familiar with all this.

Person in recovery As a Certified Peer Specialist, when I was at WPIC, I can say there is a need to know someone else is going through it. Tell the person that you [the police officer] have a friend or a family member. The important thing is for them to stay safe and not have to go to the hospital. Going to Re:Solve or contacting a CTT worker might be better than the hospital. When family members get overwhelmed the person can get stressed to the limit. Then the family calls the police.

Person in recovery I was so depressed. I needed optimism and to let me cry. I needed to be listened to. Positive things are happening. There's a lot of cops. They should be peeled off. There are some jobs that are good for people to do and some jobs people should not do.

Person in recovery Some cops are good; some are not. They run my name and see I'm a drug addict. I know they know they're now trying to take me to jail. They then speak to me worse than anyone speaks to anyone. So my past is used against me—no matter where I am in my recovery.

Police officer Sometimes officers see the worst of the worst of people. Drug addicts can bring it on themselves. Officers then want to prevent a crime. Drugs can make a person completely different from who they really are. One bad experience negates a million good cops or addicts. We see so much.

Person in recovery I'd like to see no more guns. Say I was venting and I'm being very loud. Say I filled a complaint against the agency. My issue was I was frustrated about complaining with the services, dealing with stigma there and their continuing abuse of me. Their abuse can end up being violent—so the cops get called on the consumer. This was about them taking my SSI check and the cops get called on me.

Question 2 from a provider of services to the police : What has been the education or your experience with NARCAN?

Police in recovery There are multiple drug overdoses within days. How much Narcan does a person get? (Opinions expressed on how people get addicted to opioids from the perspective of pain treatment and end up going to the street for cheaper drugs) Feelings get complicated when you go from feeling like you are a hero life saver and then getting cussed out by the one whose life you just saved.

Person in recovery Isn't there a better place than jail to treat addiction whether it came from physical or mental pain? Jail then just adds one more huge problem in life to deal with. It's not a war on drugs. It's a war on us. Even when you get clean like I was, criminality just gets in the way of recovery. It's all just a set up to make you fail.

An extended discussion followed regarding the current way the country is trying to cope with all the related issues. Frustration with the way things are now was expressed by everyone present.

Person in recovery It might help to deal with mental health issues first—not the drug issues because of all the addicts who are also dealing with mental illness.

Police officer question Where does the addiction actually start?

A full group discussion again followed about the problem from a national epidemic to a family and neighborhood problem and how bad it was for the person who is addicted. There was a lot of hopelessness expressed from all those perspectives.

Person in recovery When I was using drugs...tell me, what's the difference between what they prescribe and what I take (recreationally)? I got mad at God. Why don't the drugs that are supposed to work, work?

Question 3: What would improve the relationships between police officers and people with mental illness?

Police officer I think we should just keep being friendly and let the conversations mature—the relationships then mature.

Person in recovery People can be afraid to talk to anyone. Another said she felt the police did not listen to her when she thought someone was trying to break in to her apartment.

Police officer Listening is the most important thing.

Person in recovery Stigma is the thing. We are all afraid to talk to each other. Everybody can have a bad day and have a bad history.

Question 4: Let's talk about the fear each of us has that enters into our encounters with each other.

Police officer Fear the first thing. Fear of the light we are being cast in. How will anything we do be perceived in the media?

Provider staff Trauma. There is trauma on both sides. That heightens alertness, decreases executive functioning [decision making], and makes thinking clearly less possible. Everybody gets caught in the fight or flight response. We need to think about vicarious trauma too.

Police officer These kinds of situations (community dialogues) are good for reframing encounters. Plus they provide for peer support for the officers.

Person in recovery We need more “door stops” to get to know officers. Just knock on the door and say good morning.

Police officer We go to community meetings. You should go to them.

Person in recovery How about you come to the agencies to get to know people in the mental health world? Come in plain clothes. Then you have a deeper relationship.

Police officer We do get together with youth organizations to chat. We also go to senior high-rises.

Person in recovery All my experiences with cops is bad. Even when I tried to do good by calling cops for help they arrested me. I did have warrants but I called for help. We need more places to interact. The constant fight or flight wears on you. You have to reach out.

Police officer That's interesting. We need help too. See there is help.

Person in recovery It isn't expected that police will see us. It felt good today to hear them and be heard. Stigma wasn't mentioned enough today—not only mental illness or addiction. Everybody needs to see the person not the diagnosis. Have patience. Comfort people. Listen to people. When you take addicts to jail think rehabilitation. I'm grateful for the police. Just care about people with an open heart. You have so much potential to help people. You will make the biggest impact a person can make in another life.

Final prompt Let's go around the room and everyone make a conclusion comment.

Provider staff We need more opportunities like this trialogues.

Provider staff This is positive. I'm glad about the respect shown. We would like more trialogues like this.

Person in recovery I appreciate the opportunity to participate today.

Person in recovery I'm glad I got a chance to talk to the police. It is good to know that there are good people on our side. I'm appreciative too.

Police officer I'm grateful and glad we were honest. Everyone could take something and leave something.

Police officer I'm grateful for you having us—for allowing us to share.

Police officer I'm grateful too. This was unexpected. I'm glad I came. We all need to see the person and people need to respect authority.

Provider staff I'm grateful too. I am amazed at seeing the other perspective.

Provider staff I'm grateful for the awareness coming to the table.

Provider staff I appreciate today but we need one of these trialogues with judges