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‘Making connections’: Jail re-entry hub continues to grow



OBSERVER Photo by Gregory Bacon Pictured are Vito Randazzo, Chautauqua CARES Project Director, and Asia Leonard, a Peer Bridger with the CARES program.

MAYVILLE – The newly established re-entry hub by the Chautauqua County Sheriff’s Office continues to have success.

The re-entry hub officially opened in April, 2024. It was placed in the former Mayville Village Hall Code Office, where it remains today.

It was designed to be a place where released inmates of the county jail could walk over and get some immediate services, like charging a phone, making a phone call or getting a bus ticket. It was also designed to be a place where they could learn about long-term options for re-entering society, to help them avoid the problems that caused them to land in jail in the first place.

One of the motivating factors to create the hub was that newly released inmates would wander around the village of Mayville, stopping by multiple businesses, asking for assistance.

The hub was branded the CARES re-entry hub for Chautauqua Comprehensive Addiction Response and Evaluation System, with the goal of helping to find services to treat addiction a major component.

The CARES program is run by Vito Randazzo, under the direction of Sheriff Jim Quattrone.

The county Planning Board recently visited the CARES re-entry hub to learn about its success and discuss plans for the future.

Randazzo noted that the CARES program has evolved, where they now offer up to 90 days recovery support; offer peer support, which includes weekly check-ins; care management; and referrals to community organizations.

Randazzo noted that jail releases are not always scheduled. There are times when an individual will attend a court appearance and the judge decides that person is free.

“They come back, get their stuff and off they go. ... If you’re somebody who is homeless or having struggles, that can be very hard going back into the community,” he said.

The CARES hub is open during the day Monday to Friday, with extended hours on Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays.

Randazzo, who has a background in mental health and substance abuse treatment, joined the Sheriff’s Office to create the CARES re-entry hub.

Before it opened, Randazzo said he met with a number of stakeholders in the county to discuss what would be the best way to help this program succeed.

“We came up with this concept of this hub where people can come, where they can connect to services, and then get connected to treatment and get follow-up,” he said.

Another focus on the hub was that it would be able to address people immediately, as soon as they exited the jail. “When someone, especially in addiction for example, wants help, we have to strike now. We cannot wait two days. We cannot wait because that state of change moves,” he said.

Randazzo noted that sometimes when people get out of jail, they can meet with providers and immediately get connected. If they can’t do it right then, referrals are made right then and there.

“That’s what CARES is really all about. CARES is about making connections and building connections,” he said.

Randazzo said the CARES program has two full-time peers on staff.

“I told the Sheriff that I needed peers. I needed people with life experience because when they (released inmates) come here, they don’t want to see Vito. They’re like ‘what do you know?’ I know a lot but not a lot about living in their shoes,” he said.

Randazzo said the peers will work with the released inmates for up to three months.

“They’re doing follow ups, they’re doing weekly check-ins with them, saying ‘hey, how are you doing?’ and really encouraging them, making referrals to their providers, making sure they’re going to their appointments,” he said.

According to Randazzo, about 45% of their clients at the CARES center are reported as being homeless, 82% are reported to having a substance use history, 43% reported having a behavioral health history, and 74% reported not being connected to services.

“Too many times in society, people judge people and say they’re just drug users. ... The fact of the matter is, they are people. They are humans. are people with struggles. Just quitting a substance is not that easy,” he said.

The CARES program runs the re-entry hub. They also collaborate with the county’s Mental Health Department, the jail, and the jail’s Medicated Assistant Treatment program.

About 75% of the people they serve come directly from the county jail. The remainder are homeless individuals or others who have been referred to the CARES program.

Randazzo said when they first opened, they made around 10 referrals a month. Now they average 35-45 referrals a month.

Randazzo said their program is funded through the federal government through various grants.

Planning board members asked him what would happen if that funding were cut by the federal government. He said that would need a conversation with the Sheriff and the county to see what they want to do.

Randazzo argues that the cost of incarcerating an individual is much more expensive than what it costs for them to run the CARES program.

He adds that what they’re doing in Chautauqua County could be a model for other counties around the state as well as the nation.
