

For these Suffolk County Community College Addiction Studies Students, Helping Addicts Recover is their Life's Work



Addiction studies student Jennifer Smith at Suffolk County Community College in Brentwood. Credit: Morgan Campbell

By Maura McDermott

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Jennifer Smith knew the thin, sallow man who would smoke outside a Medford supermarket was addicted to drugs and living in a tent in the woods.

Smith, who worked as a clerk at the supermarket, felt compelled to reach out to the man, remembering her own dark days battling alcohol addiction.

“You don’t have to live like this,” she recalled telling him. “Why don’t you just go to rehab for a day, take all the showers you want in that day, eat all the food you want in that day, and if you don’t like it, you can just leave. But ... at least you’ll be out of the woods.”

Then, after a weeklong absence that worried Smith, the man showed up again one day this spring. He had gone to rehab.

WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

- **New York State is grappling with a severe shortage** of trained addiction recovery counselors, even as the region continues to be impacted by the opioid crisis.
- **With average wages ranging from \$19 to \$30 an hour**, or about \$40,000 to \$60,000 a year, advocates say it can be hard to attract qualified workers.
- **For many college students who enter the field**, they are motivated not by a paycheck but by a need to give back — inspired by their own struggles with addiction or those of their loved ones.

“He was clean,” Smith, 44, said. “He was happy. It was such a difference. He looked so healthy.”

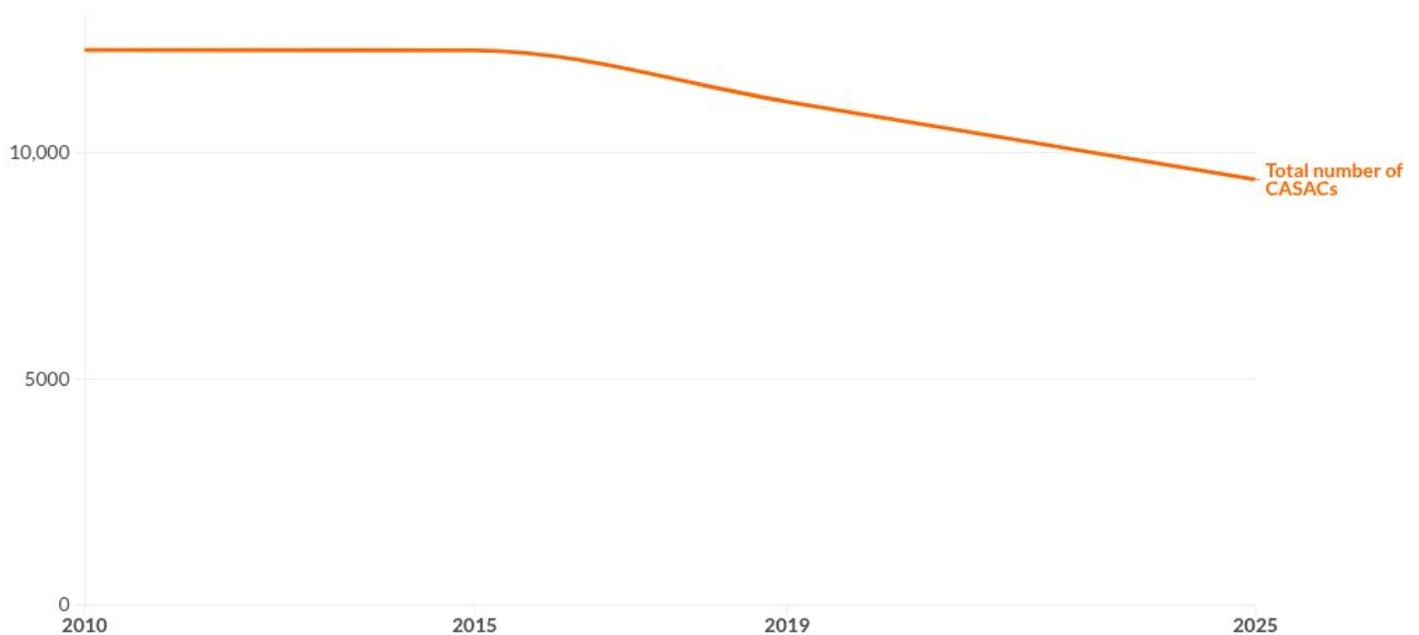
It is the sort of transformation Smith hopes to see more often, as she earns her associate degree in addiction studies at Suffolk County Community College and works toward a career as a substance abuse counselor.

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“There's a heavy need in the field, a really big need in our field for more addiction professionals,” said Mary Brite, chief operating officer of the Queens-based Outreach Training Institute, which has locations in Brentwood, Bellport and Roosevelt. “If you ask our agency, and probably any other agency out there, what keeps you up at night, what's the number one thing? Workforce, 100% it's going to be workforce.”

Decline in credentialed recovery professionals

The number of state-certified credentialed alcoholism and substance abuse counselors (CASACs) has been on the decline since 2010.



Source: NY Office of Addiction Services and Supports • 2025 figures are as of Dec. 2

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For many students who do choose to enter the field, including Smith, experts said they are motivated not by a paycheck but by a need to give back — inspired by their own struggles with addiction or those of their loved ones.

“For a lot of folks, it's very mission-driven — ‘Somebody helped me save my life, let me help somebody save their own,’ ” said Melissa Earle, a clinical associate professor and director of online instruction at Stony Brook’s School of Social Welfare.

Opioid settlement funding

When the opioid crisis intensified in the New York region about 10 to 15 years ago, “Suffolk County was one of the hardest-hit counties in the state. It really was ground zero,” Brite said.

In 2014, there were 207 deaths caused by heroin and prescription opioids in Suffolk, the most in any county in New York, a report by state Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli found. In Nassau the same year, there were 148 such deaths, the third-highest number in the state after Suffolk and Brooklyn, the report showed.

The crisis peaked in the pandemic's early years, though deaths have since started to decline. On Long Island, drug overdose deaths jumped from 687 in 2020 to 823 the next year, then fell to 514 last year — an improvement, though still higher than 10 years earlier, figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show.

From 2021 through 2023, Suffolk County received more than \$100 million from the state's settlements with opioid makers and sellers to help pay for substance abuse prevention, treatment and

recovery. SCCC's addiction studies program has received \$800,000 from the county's settlement funds, along with more than \$300,000 from the state Office of Addiction Services and Supports. The grants pay for full scholarships, internships and other services through May.

The funding has had a dramatic impact on the program. Since 2023, the college's two-year program has more than doubled, from 46 students to 100.



Attendees listen to Eric Martinez, director of the syringe exchange program at Community Action for Social Justice, as he gives Narcan administration training at Suffolk County Community College. Credit: Michael A. Rupolo Sr.

Along with an associate degree whose credits can transfer to a four-year college, SCCC's program prepares students to get certified as credentialed alcoholism and substance abuse counselors, or CASACs. (Several other local schools, including Stony Brook University, Molloy University and the Outreach Training Institute, offer stand-alone CASAC training.)

CASACs can offer counseling and other services in inpatient and outpatient addiction recovery facilities. Some go on to earn bachelor's or graduate degrees in social work, counseling or related fields, enabling them to diagnose and treat mental illnesses, among other work, and earn higher salaries.

Demand for the workers is intense, with SCCC's students highly sought after as interns and CASACs, said William Rule, the college's addiction studies program coordinator.

More than 48 million American teens and adults have a substance use disorder, but "the number of substance use professionals has not kept pace with the need to maintain and expand substance use services," the National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Agency Directors said in a report this year.

The number of CASACs in New York has declined by 23%, from 12,275 certified CASACs, including trainees, in 2010 to just over 9,400 this month, state figures show. More than 1,700 have earned new credentials so far this year, compared with nearly 1,850 in 2010.

At New York treatment centers, 64% of administrators reported needing more counselors, with burnout and low wages among the factors making it difficult to recruit and retain workers, a 2021 report by the Rockefeller Institute of Government found.

Experts said New York has sought to expand its addiction recovery workforce by increasing workers' pay and funding training for CASACs and other workers.

The opioid settlement funds have made a big difference, but the funds won't last forever, and federal cuts to Medicaid could have an impact on addiction recovery funding, Earle said. The legislation known as the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act" includes hundreds of billions of dollars in Medicaid cuts nationwide that will kick in next year, independent analysts said.

State officials "are going to have to look at, 'What are we going to do with this significant reduction and basically, who gets what?' " Earle said. "It's scary."

Giving back

Many aspiring counselors in the SCCC program were inspired to enter the field after starting to recover from addictions of their own.

That is true for John Shea, 46, who lives in North Babylon with his 9-year-old French bulldog, Ida. Shea served in the military from 2003 to 2007, and he said when he came home from deployment to Afghanistan, he was coping with high levels of trauma.

"I didn't know how to really deal with it, so I started drinking, to try to drink away my problems," he said. "I myself at one point tried to take my own life, but luckily, I called 911, like, 60 seconds after taking a lot of medication."

The first police officer to respond was a veteran, Shea recalled. "He said, 'It's OK not to be OK, and there's a lot of people that will help if you ask for help.' "



John Shea, 46, is in his third semester in Suffolk County Community College's two-year addiction studies program. Credit: Barry Sloan

Shea now volunteers with the Warrior Ranch Foundation, an equine therapy center in Calverton, and is organizing a No One Left Behind Christmas gathering for veterans and first responders at the American Legion Post 944 in Kings Park on Dec. 25.

"'You're not alone' is one of the hugest messages I try to get across," Shea said.

Smith, too, wants to give back. In addition to working days as a supermarket clerk, she attends night classes at SCCC's Brentwood campus, making a three-hour round trip on mass transit from the North Bellmore sober house where she lives.

She said she wants to do for others what a rehab facility worker named Barry once did for her.

Smith grew up in Westchester County as the youngest of three children. Her father was an alcoholic, and the family's home life was chaotic, she said. At age 4 or 5, she said, "it would be 1 o'clock in the morning, and I would hear him and my mom have arguments, like cutthroat, blood-curdling, just screaming and shouting."



Jennifer Smith wears motivational bracelets at Suffolk County Community College in Brentwood. Credit: Morgan Campbell

In 2001, when she was 20, she said she gave birth to a son but felt she couldn't give him the childhood he deserved, so she gave him up for adoption. She remains in contact with him and his adoptive parents, and he is thriving, she said. But, she said, when she gave him up, "It tore me up inside."

Later in her 20s, both her parents and her grandmother died within a few years, she said.

"That's when I started drinking heavily," she said. She flunked out of the private college she had been attending and lost her scholarship, she said. Then came a succession of jobs in retail and administrative work and as a medical assistant, as well as stints attending a community college and state school, but she said her drinking kept derailing her progress.

In 2022, after an argument with a friend, she broke her promise to herself that she would never drive drunk, and she drove her car into a stop sign, she said. No one was hurt, she said.

That night, she made a suicide attempt, but then she thought of her son, changed her mind and walked 4 miles to the hospital, she said.

A 28-day stay at an inpatient substance abuse rehabilitation program followed, she said. That is where she met Barry, a worker she describes as "like a den mom, except he was a guy."

One day, Smith was sitting alone in the TV room, curled up in an armchair, crying, when Barry approached her.

"You're not meant for this," he told her. "You're going to go so far, and this is just going to be like a nightmare that you're going to wake up from."

She recalled, “The way he said it, it just really hit me, and I really started to think, ‘You know, this is just a minor setback.’ ... I'm getting clean. And that's, like, the first step.”

She learned about SCCC’s program – and the full scholarships it offers – from a Suffolk County social services worker, she said.

This semester, Smith received a \$1,000 grant as a 2025 Coca-Cola Leaders of Promise Scholar, an award for community college students who belong to the Phi Theta Kappa honors society.

She said she expects to be the second person in her family to earn a college degree, then get her master’s and doctoral degrees in social work. Eventually, she plans to open a rehab center for women where patients with children can get counseling for themselves as well as their children.

“I found my purpose,” she said.