

City program trains peer advocates to combat opioid crisis

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It wasn't until her fourth attempt at recovery, in 2001, that Barbara Bell was able to end 27 years of addiction to drugs and alcohol. Since then she has devoted her life to helping others end their struggle with addiction.

Bell, 55, is one of the 39 graduates of the city Department of Small Business Services' new training program for certified peer recovery advocates. They help individuals with substance-use disorders create recovery plans and provide support during the process. Since the three-month program was announced in January, two cohorts have graduated.

Bell grew up in Jamaica, Queens, and started drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana when she was 15. Later she began using cocaine and moved on to smoking crack cocaine. She did three stints in prison for possessing and selling narcotics. Because of parole violations, her original four-year sentence ballooned to eight years.

"I wasn't trying. You have to have surrender to the addiction. I wasn't ready. I didn't buy in to the recovery process," Bell said of her earlier attempts at recovery.

During her final two years in prison, she began to use the recovery programs available to avoid continuing the cycle wherein she would end up using drugs and living homeless on the street.

"This time I was very tired of just going in circles and not achieving anything," she said.

Bell entered a program at the nonprofit Samaritan Village and began attending group and counseling sessions. She helped coordinate the programming and facilitate conversations among her peers.

"I think I was doing peer-to-peer services and I didn't know I was doing it," she said. She was offered a counselor-in-training role with the program and later worked for the nonprofit J-CAP. There she learned some of the skills that are essential for peer advocates, such as setting healthy boundaries with clients.

In 2013 she stopped working because of health issues, but when she was ready to go back to work, she looked for a different type of opportunity.

The Department of Small Business Services devised the peer advocate training program for unemployed and underemployed people who have a personal history or experience with substance-use recovery. The department's New York Alliance for Careers in Healthcare collaborated with CUNY, the city Health Department and the state Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services to develop the program.

"As a counselor, they don't you want to share too much of your experience. You're more there to guide them," Bell said. "I'm able to spend more time with the peers. It's helping them make the right decisions, not making them for them."

The training has paid off for participants. NYC Health + Hospitals has hired Bell and 13 other grads to provide peer services in its emergency departments. They will start in a few weeks. Nine additional graduates were hired by Community Care of Brooklyn, the Maimonides Medical Center-led DSRIP Performing Provider System. Peer advocates are paid about \$40,000 a year.

Unintentional drug-overdose deaths in the city rose 46.6%, to 1,374, last year, with heroin the most common drug involved.

"One of things that distinguishes New York City from other cities is we have lots of slots in methadone treatment waiting for occupants," said Dr. Luke Bergmann, assistant vice president of behavioral health at NYC Health + Hospitals. "The challenge we face is in linking people with opioid-use disorders to the treatment."

Peer advocates don't help only overdose victims. Patients may be referred to the advocates when they come to the emergency room for a physical condition and are intoxicated or appear at risk of a substance-use disorder.

"If you approach people while they are more reflective about change and what led them to that circumstance, there's likely a greater chance they will be moved to take that first step," Bergmann said. —J.L.