

Mental health centers enable users

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Mental health centers enable drop-ins in their new lives
PATERSON -- Grover Rosado could use some new friends. In September, the 34-year-old was released from a state psychiatric hospital after two years of treatment for a combined diagnosis of mental illness and chemical addiction: paranoid schizophrenia he attempted to soothe with alcohol and marijuana.

With the help of local psychiatric services, he was given a spot in a mental health day program in Paterson, and an apartment in Passaic where, for 12 hours a day, a supervisor is on duty to make sure he and other residents take their meds. He has a roommate he likes, and his parents stop by almost daily. But many of his old friends are people he used drugs and alcohol with, and he can't hang out with them anymore.

"I got to find new ones," he said.

Try meeting new people when you've got heavy labels like schizophrenic and addict to lug around.

"Some people get scared," Rosado said. "They're like, 'Oh, you're schizophrenic, you might get violent, you see things and you hear things,' and stuff like that. Some people notice real quickly. They're like, 'What's wrong with you? Why you got to take medication?' I just tell them the truth, because I do want them to know. I tell them I've had a major mental illness since I was a kid, and it's hard, because they're like, 'Oh, he crazy.'"

Rosado has met a few people in his day program, but spends a lot of time at home watching TV -- tough for a guy who used to have a girlfriend and a busy social life. So last week, he decided to check out the Our House Self-Help Center in Paterson.

The center, which hosts an open house for the public on Wednesday from 2 to 6 p.m., opened three months ago on the second floor of an office building on Broadway, steps from Barnert Hospital.

Designed for people with mental illness or the combination diagnosis known as MICA, which stands for mentally ill-chemically addicted, Our House is one of 22 such "self-help" centers throughout the state. Run by the nonprofit organization Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey (CSP), it is funded through donations and grants from the state Division of Mental Health Services. CSP operates a similar center, Social Connections, in Clifton.

As that name implies, the self-help centers' mission is twofold: first, to provide opportunities for "socialization," second, to offer information and resources on supportive housing, employment, food pantries, hotlines and hospitals.

"Having a mental illness can be pretty isolating," said Judy Baines, a CSP director who oversees several centers. "If people choose to be alone, that's one thing, but just to be lonely and isolated out there is a terrible thing, and I think it drives them back to hospitals."

Already, some 60 people have visited Our House, and 15 to 20 stop by daily to play pool, use the computers, attend a support group meeting or simply chat around two kitchen tables or the chocolate-leather couches in the center's living room.

"These places become almost like families to people," said Baines. "You don't have to explain why you're not working; people know why you're not working. It's comfortable."

"Too often in the mental health community, people are not looked upon as human beings," said Christina Gelpi, the center's manager. At Our House, "No one's asking you, 'What's your diagnosis?' We want this to be a welcoming place."

Like Rosado, many of those who have dropped in attend classes from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Harbor House, a mental health program run through St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center in Paterson.

Last Wednesday, Joe Repasky, 39, of Passaic, sat in the kitchen with Karen Bonomo, 44, and Albert Crummie, 65, both of Paterson, talking about the Giants' dramatic Super Bowl win.

"I live by myself in an apartment," said Repasky. "I could go two weeks without talking to someone. Even if I don't come here every day, it's nice to know the center's here."

Some take advantage of the center's other offerings. Dennis Del La Penna, 33, of Paterson, knocked balls into the pockets of the Our House pool table while he waited for a MICA meeting to end so he could play Pac-Man on one of the computers.

On a trip into the kitchen for popcorn, Del La Penna joked with Repasky and the others.

"I just self-helped myself," he tells the group at Repasky's table. "You know what I did? I just went out for a smoke."

Cynthia Rodriguez of Garfield also attends Harbor House, but has started coming to Our House twice a week. Using cocaine was her favorite way to deal with her bipolar disorder, depression and anxiety, but she has been clean for two years, she said. At 48, she is preparing to move out of her daughter's house and live on her own for the first time in her life, a prospect that makes her a little nervous. The center helps her combat her tendency to "isolate" when she's feeling depressed, and has also given her a place to talk to people about her upcoming move.

Our House is peer-run, which means that everyone from Gelpi, the manager, to several group facilitators are what CSP calls a "mental health consumer," meaning someone who has or had a mental health diagnosis. Gelpi herself has been hospitalized three times for depression. One of her goals for the year is to help others at Our House find employment, which she said has been crucial to her recovery.

"The whole idea is for people to be involved in productive activities," she said.

Gelpi runs the weekly community meetings and keeps the center running -- everything from helping people find useful information to stocking the kitchen with snacks.

At last week's community meeting, she described some of the house rules, among them "no grubbing" -- borrowing or lending money. She noted that the center's van driver has been overburdened with pickups, and suggested that people who come from Harbor House consider taking public transportation.



From left, Albert Aboyoun, Theodore Mann and Yvonne Clayborne playing their regular card game of spades in the computer room of the Our House Self-Help Center in Paterson. (LESLIE BARBARO / HERALD NEWS)

"You guys have money to buy cigarettes; you have money to buy this and that," she told the dozen or so people gathered in the living room. "We're too catered to here. All of you are capable. I really want to encourage you guys to be independent, because this is a self-help center, not a day-care."

Bonomo said she was concerned about getting home at night after dark, but she and others agreed they could take Paterson's dollar buses to the center.

Still, the self-help model was a little intimidating at first for some center-goers, said Baines. There was a core group of about 10 people who got involved when the center opened, and "they seemed a little skeptical," she said.

To address that anxiety, CSP had a meeting with members of another center. "We had people come over from the Hackensack center, which has been around for 20 years, to show them you can do this," she said. "Again it was a self-help model: people who had been through this helping other people who are going through this."