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## **River Valley Family Health Centers' peer support coaches' experience combines with treatment options**

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River Valley Family Health Centers' substance abuse recovery services include peer coaching support by people like Shayna Kittell, who combines training with her own lived experience. (Montrose Daily Press/file photo)

Shayna Kittell remembers being 14 — but in addition to the normal teenage stresses, she had a secret.

Kittell was smoking marijuana and, when she heard that methamphetamine could cause weight loss, it piqued her interest. “I wanted to lose weight. I was already smoking weed. I tried it. I started smoking meth. Within a few years, I was using intravenously,” she recounted.

From there, Kittell spiraled into homelessness and legal trouble. “I was stealing to not only feed my habit, but to clothe myself, feed myself and keep myself warm at night,” she said.

But Kittell isn’t sharing her story for sympathy. She found help and through it, a way out of addiction. Now, as a peer support coach with River Valley Family Health Centers, she helps show others – those who are ready – the same pathway from substance abuse.

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A peer support coach is a person with lived experience with addiction who helps guide those who are struggling, while providing them with hope and an example that recovery is possible.

“It’s so very important,” said Kaye Hotsenpiller, River Valley’s interim CEO.

“They understand what that person is going through and they understand how hard it is to find resources and to wake up each day and get through life. These coaches can help connect them with housing, or childcare (for example) or just help them get up and get to work, if that’s the need. They provide encouragement, just whatever support that person might need to stay true and not go backwards in their treatment.”

River Valley is a federally qualified health center that accepts all forms of insurance, as well as patients without insurance, and offers a sliding-scale payment system.

Its addiction recovery services entail medication-assisted therapy, wherein the patient meets with a primary care provider to ensure he or she is staying away from drugs or alcohol, then prescribes and monitors medication to help curb the cravings. River Valley pairs that with treatment from behavioral health therapists, who then work hand-in-hand with the peer support recovery coaches.

A treatment program might, for example, include promoting a healthy diet/good nutrition, physical therapy, or even acupuncture to help reduce pain, Hotsenpiller said.

“All of those kinds of things can help with that pain a person is feeling that gets them addicted to pain pills. What we try to do is, in a holistic manner, reduce that pain and not through pain pills,” she said.

Kittell’s own push to get clean came from being sentenced to probation. Although that proved ineffective, drug court (now call problem-solving court) held her feet to the fire and propelled her to help herself.

Ultimately, it “saved my life,” Kittell said.

“Judge (Mary) Deganhart, she basically told me, ‘I’m giving you one chance, and one chance only, to stop using and if not, you’re going to jail.’ I had a hefty jail sentence hanging over my head.”

Her family also gave her one more chance, allowing her to live with them. “I needed help, or I wasn’t going to make it. They gave me that one chance and I took it and ran with it,” Kittell said.

Drug court was tough and Kittell is honest: she hated it at first because so much was expected, from drug tests, to court dates, employment and classes.

“Had I not had to do those things, I wouldn’t have been able to build the life I have built. I am actually so grateful for it and I’m so grateful all those things were expected of me. If they hadn’t have been, things might look really different for me,” Kittell said.

She stepped into peer support coach training about two years ago and then, spotted a flyer announcing a position at River Valley. With training completed, Kittell applied.

She's at River Valley to help people like herself — and to counter prevalent myths about those who struggle with substance abuse disorder.

“People with substance abuse disorder are continually blamed for their disease. People have proven this is a disease. Most are predisposed genetically to it,” she said.

Although certain circumstances fueled by addiction require an arrest and the involvement of the legal system, people should be referred to treatment — and there should be more options, said Kittell.

“I think a lot of people think these people need to go to jail or be locked up for the rest of their lives. I don't think that's the case,” she said. “ ... I think in this community, people don't want to believe there is a problem, or if they believe there is this problem, they want to deal with in in other ways (incarceration).”

But that cheats people of a shot at rehab, plus drives recidivism, Kittell said.

Recently, she began looking within the jail system for ways to help inmates who may be struggling with addiction. Kittell spoke with Montrose County Sheriff Gene Lillard about her hope to provide information, as well as emotional support, for those people and get them focused on long-term recovery, including medication-assisted therapy.

“I appreciate what she is willing to do,” Lillard said, adding there is a definite need for more community-based treatment. Substance abuse factors heavily into the types of cases with which his agency deals.

“Just about everything leads (back) to that, whether it's alcohol or opioids,” Lillard said.

He's heartened that Kittell is willing to use her own life to reach out and connect with others, he also said.

“She definitely has got real-world experience. Those kinds of people can reach out and talk on their level. A lot of the times, people understand that. They can relate to what she has to say, because she's been there,” Lillard said.

Kittell, who can refer people to medication-assisted therapy and in-patient treatment, says she is ready when those in addiction are ready.

“Not everyone is ready right away, but when you are ready, I’m here to help you,” she said.

She circled back to others and programs that helped her. At Narcotics Anonymous, for instance, she learned the mantra: “We can only keep what we have by giving it away.”

“For a long time, it was hard for me. I was almost scared, because I didn’t want to end up talking with somebody who was using and end back where I started,” Kittell said.

“Ultimately, that saying is the best form of recovery anyone could have — helping someone else get that hope and strength back.”

Making the call is the first step, said Hotsenpiller.

“What I appreciate about River Valley is it could be some person who just wants to get treatment. They haven’t committed a crime or anything like that, that is mandating treatment,” she said. “We’re seeing people who want to get better for themselves. I just love that. It’s their idea and they’re a part of it.”

Even if a person can’t call River Valley, Kittell urges him or her to reach out somewhere. There is the Center for Mental Health’s Crisis Walk-in Center at 320 N. Cascade Ave. (970-252-6220) and the Colorado Crisis Services, 844-493-8255 (or text TALK to 38255), she said.

“I just want to get the conversation open about our community and that’s not a bad thing. We are not bad people; we are humans,” Kittell said.

“Some of us, we just need a little extra help and if somebody out there needs that extra help, they can call me or my coworker at River Valley.”

In Montrose, reach River Valley at 970-497-3333; in Olathe, at 970-323-6141, or in Delta at 970-874-8981.

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