

PROGRAMS: Peer Support Services

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Support services supplied by peers

By Logan Krum



When Aja Alston found herself hospitalized many years ago, she and other patients would go down to the cafeteria for lunch with Mr. Dean, a pedestrian-seeming person who didn't seem to blend in with the rest of the hospital staff. In a system where many of the counselors and psychiatrists had no experience with homelessness and mental health issues, Alston found that Mr. Dean understood and empathized with her struggles.

Mr. Dean didn't seem to be a doctor, so one day, one of the patients asked who exactly he was.

"Mr. Dean said I know what you are going through. I've sat in the same hospital chairs, slept in the same hospital beds, and eaten this same hospital food. I'm your peer. I'm a CPS," said Alston, a Morrell Park resident.

Aja Alston.

A Certified Peer Specialist takes on the role of a mentor in the lives of people with disabilities seeking help and recovery, helping them set individual goals that would lead toward improvement and recovery.

Mr. Dean encouraged the group to learn more about it, and for Alston, it was a life-changing discovery.

Not only did it provide the support she needed, but almost a decade later, Alston now works as a CPS herself at Peer Support Services. The program is a part of Integrated Behavioral Health Services offered by JEVS, based at 9350 Ashton Road.

As someone who experienced what her patients are going through, she is able to offer support on a much closer level.

"I spent years without having someone to help guide me through what it was like and how you overcome it," she said.

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The program matches clients with a CPS who will help them work toward any number of individual goals. Peer specialists provide a large number of services, including support in education, trauma-informed wellness, hospitalizations and community integration.

Joseph Malloy III, a South Philadelphia resident, met Alston after issues at home led to him couch surfing with friends that eventually led him to a church shelter program. As they shared the experience of struggling with homelessness, Malloy said it wasn't customary for him to receive support until he met her.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to work with someone who knows exactly what I need to know, and it's clear she has a genuine concern for what's best for me," he said.

Before he met Alston, he cycled through multiple case managers who didn't know how to handle his housing situation. He eventually resolved the situation himself, and with Alston's help, is working to ensure he will never end up in that situation again. He's thinking about one day becoming a housing advocate for others.

The program was established at JEVS four years ago. Since COVID-19 hit, it's been much more difficult for peer specialists to meet up with their clients, but Alston still hosts regular virtual meetings with her group of more than 20 people to keep them on track.

Clients can choose goals in categories like living, learning, employment and social, and once they meet one goal they can move on to the next. Once they feel comfortable with their achievements, they can choose to graduate.

Visit jevshumanservices.org/program/peer-support-services/ to learn more about the program.