

Clubhouse helps people with mental illness regain self-esteem

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The Salt Lake Tribune

Article Last Updated: 03/03/2008 12:21:15 AM MST



Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker meets Angela Jensen, a... (Al Hartmann/The Salt Lake Tribune)

Eleisha Hewes paused, swallowed her nettlesome nerves, then poured out her soul.

Before the mayor and a handful of community leaders, the survivor from Salt Lake City unspooled her chaotic gang days. She recalled losing her fiancé in a deadly street fight, and how she was raped by gang members before suffering a miscarriage when she revealed the news of the pregnancy, and was assaulted.

"It pretty much turned me numb against society," Hewes said, noting she washed out of multiple schools before landing in a hospital. There, long-detached from family and friends, Hewes was diagnosed with mental illness.

And that was when her life began to rebound.

Looking to cope, she found companionship in Alliance House - a voluntary Salt Lake City "clubhouse" where 200 people with mental illness work together to complete their education, find housing, and in many cases, employment. It is a mental-health haven based on the principle that work restores self-esteem - the model is duplicated in 400 spots across the globe - and it is thriving in Utah's capital.

Bordering a neighborhood bar in an old fire station at 1724 S. Main St., Alliance House was founded 21 years ago as a sort of halfway house for the mentally ill. It is certified by the International Center for Clubhouse Development.

Alliance House is not a residential center and does not consider its clientele to be patients. Instead, the program includes "members" who gather in a 9-to-5 workday format where dignity trumps debilitation.

A shoestring staff of nine deliberately is outnumbered by the house's 50 daily members, the majority of whom are insured by Medicaid and partner with Valley Mental Health. The idea is to break down barriers and blend.

"That's the fascinating thing about it," executive director Jeremy Christensen said during a recent open house for Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker. "Every decision, every meeting, everything we do, members do it."

"There's not an authoritative type of feeling. There's real ownership."

Alliance House does not look or feel like a medical facility. Instead of a pill counter, there is a snack bar manned by a member. An airy lunchroom flanks a chef's kitchen where members buy and prepare all the food. And instead of dreary couches, computer stations line a sun-splashed room behind the fire station's old bay doors.

During the mayor's tour, business in the clubhouse buzzed with little interruption. Some members worked on the in-house newsletter or lunch, while others enjoyed the spring-like sunshine for conversation over a smoke break.

"I have hated myself for so many years," said Karen Sharp, a member who marvels that Alliance board members now solicit her opinion on how to run the program. "This has given me a sense of worth."

Besides the weekday routine, members benefit from community outings some evenings and weekends. Many are successfully placed in subsidized apartments or HUD housing.

And, over the past five years, the clubhouse has played host to several graduation ceremonies - complete with cap and gown.

Perhaps most satisfying is getting people back to work, according to Development Director Karen Wildfoerster. Employers who partner with Alliance range from the Jones Waldo law firm and The Grand America Hotel, to Barnes & Noble and Squatters. While the average for employment of similar organizations hovers near 10 percent, Alliance's employment rate is 30 percent.

"It's really a win-win," said Wildfoerster. Working helps members feel dramatically better, she said.

A social worker and therapist, Christensen is convinced the clubhouse model changes lives.

"I've heard them say, 'I don't have a reason to live,'" recalled the director, who came to Alliance after a former patient committed suicide. "Then, I see them come to a place like this, and I see that light come back to their eyes."

Consider Lila Galvan, a 57-year-old who masked her illness by medicating with alcohol. Since joining Alliance, she was sent to the East Coast for job training. And when she returned, Galvan was presented with keys to her own apartment.

"They're giving me back my credibility," she beamed, "and my sense of self-respect."

Following the tour, Becker agreed the collaborative structure helps crush the wall of stigma.

"We have to have places like this," he said. "This allows those who are otherwise unable to function to grow."

For Hewes, stepping through Alliance's open door proved more valuable than any doctor or medication.

"I realized the members here were being treated like human beings," she said.

Now, after a stint at the "clubhouse," Hewes is in her second semester of a social-work program in college. And despite her trials, she is quick to call her life a success.

"I have seen myself grow in ways I never thought I could."

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