

VOLUNTEERS

The Free Clinics is in need of new volunteers to help in our front desk reception area and patient eligibility—especially Spanish-speaking volunteers. No medical experience is necessary, and training is provided.

If you are interested in helping, please contact volunteer@thefreeclinics.org

As the COVID-19 vaccine continues to roll out to our community, it is still important to take steps to protect yourself and your family from easily-transmissible illnesses.

Remember the 3 Ws!



WEAR
a cloth mask over
your nose and mouth.



WAIT
6 feet apart. Avoid
close contact.



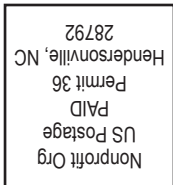
WASH
your hands or
use hand sanitizer.

Image source: NC Dept. of Health and Human Services; covid19.ncdhhs.gov



Spring 2021
Community Impact Focus:
PORT: Post-Overdose Response Team

Return Service Requested



A Message from Our Executive Director: Judith Long



Henderson County is a uniquely collaborative community, and rarely more so than with regard to our behavioral health system of care. In 2018-19, the Commissioners convened a Substance Abuse Task Force to explore community-wide, systemic efforts to address the issue, including increasing both prevention efforts and treatment and recovery efforts.

The Behavioral Health Strategic Plan for Henderson County is managed by the Behavioral Health Systems Coordinator, based at the Health Department. The plan is based upon the work of 30+ health and community leaders over several years—identifying gaps and establishing four strategic goals to improve the behavioral health of our community. Substance use disorder is one of those goals.

When funding became available from the state to address substance use disorder by creating post-overdose response teams, the Health Department applied for and was awarded funding, then partnered with The Free Clinics to create and launch the team. Originally, PORT was supposed to launch on 16 March 2020, but that was the beginning of the pandemic and the emergency stay-at-home orders. TFC and the Health Department postponed the launch of the team due to COVID-19, officially launching in mid-August.

TFC is extremely proud to partner with the Health Department in the creation of this incredible life-saving resource for Henderson County. And we are even more humbled to do so during this time of pandemic, when substance use and overdoses have sky-rocketed, causing what many are calling a second pandemic.

PORT has already transformed the way TFC approaches patients with substance use disorder. After just a few months, it is clear that PORT will transform our entire community.

828.697.8422

info@thefreeclinics.org

Introducing PORT

Henderson County's PORT consists of two certified Peer Support Specialists (persons with lived experience of substance use disorder and recovery, who have been trained and certified). PORT works with persons who have experienced an overdose, seeking to engage them in conversations about recovery. Anyone can refer a client to PORT, and persons can also self-refer. TFC has entered into agreements with Henderson County Emergency Medical Services (EMS) and Detention Center to receive direct referrals to PORT. Additionally, both AdventHealth Hendersonville and UNC Pardee Hospital are referring patients to PORT if they have come to the emergency room due to an overdose.



Meet the Team

Lexie and Kelly have their own lived experiences with addiction that make them uniquely qualified to reach out to those who are struggling. Learn more about them and the positive impact they hope to bring to our community below.

Why did you become a Certified Peer Support Specialist?

Kelly: As a person in long term recovery from alcoholism and substance use, I felt called to give back to my community. ***I wanted to be the person I needed when I felt hopeless.*** I wanted to walk beside people experiencing active addiction and show them that there is a way out and we do recover. I want to be a beacon of hope to people still living in active addiction.

Lexie: I believe to whom much is given, much is required. ***Recovery gave me my life back!*** A life worth living. Today, I am thankful for my struggles and for the “gift of desperation,” which ultimately led me to seek out a new way to live. I’m not certain I would change anything about my past even if I could, because it is what makes me the person I am today: caring, empathetic, and compassionate towards people navigating substance use and various behavioral health diagnoses.

What was your experience with addiction?

Lexie: Out of sheer curiosity and wanting to be accepted by my peers I began experimenting with substances from a young age. I grew up in a single parent home. My mother was a devout Episcopalian. I was an altar boy from the age of five...I attended Catholic school and lived a sheltered life, but was fascinated by the urban inner city life all around me (in Paterson, NJ). My substance use progressed rapidly; my life spiraled downwards. I was in full blown addiction by age 12. ***I used drugs, and eventually the drugs used me.*** I wrestled with addiction off and on for years until I surrendered for the last time January 5, 2005. Since that date I have not found it necessary to use any mood- or mind-altering substances and have been living a happy, joyous and free life, thanks to the process of recovery—for which I am eternally grateful.

Kelly: As the daughter of an alcoholic father and a social drinker mother, I never saw my alcoholism coming. It was just what adults did. My life in active



Lexie Wilkins (left) and Kelly LaRowe (right), Certified Peer Support Specialists, are some of TFC's newest team members.

addiction to other substances began at age 15. After years of bullying at school I found myself with a group of friends that smoked marijuana and drank. I was able to use and still function until my divorce in 1999. From then on it was a downward spiral to use any substance I could find, repeated incarcerations for a myriad of charges, DSS involvement, removal of my kids, homelessness, a coma, and eventual “rock bottom,” where I surrendered to the idea that I needed help. I completed 7 months of both inpatient and outpatient treatment and have now been in recovery for over 8 years.

What do you hope people will get out of their encounters with PORT?

Kelly: My hope is that the people we engage will know without a doubt that they are not alone. I hope that people will see us and realize that *there is a way out* of active addiction. It is my desire that we can, at the very least, plant a seed of hope.

How do you want to help shape PORT's growth in the community?

Lexie: I want the community to embrace PORT and accept that locking up people who live with substance use disorder is not the way—it needs to be addressed with empathy and compassion. I want the community to become educated on substance use: that it is a disease of the mind, body, and spirit. I would like to see PORT play a role in harm reduction (syringe exchange) so that those caught up in the grips of addiction can live and be safe until they lose the desire to use and find a new way to live. I want PORT to be known as a strong tower of hope where you can be built up, empowered, and connected with the resources needed to become a responsible and productive member of society and live your best life.