Employment is an important aspect in the recovery of people with a psychiatric disability as well as people recovering from substance abuse. For many consumers, work can be a motivator for recovery. People who have a psychiatric disability and/or using substances do not have to be in recovery or “recovered” before returning to work. In fact, the Integrated Dual Diagnosis Treatment (IDDT) Model supports the notion that consumers getting a job during treatment can support their recovery. Norma’s story demonstrates that work can oftentimes be the incentive that helps someone achieve in recovery.

**In the Beginning**

Norma is a woman in her mid-fifties who has two jobs, her own apartment, and visits her daughter and grandchildren regularly, but this has not always been the case. Norma spent two years of her life, homeless, and using drugs. Norma talks about her past:

“I’d get up in the morning, if I even got to sleep because I was using, I would decide what stores I would go to pick up (shoplift) things to sell, and I’d sell sometimes $400 to $500 worth of merchandise a day and that’s how I supported myself, kept clothes on my back and support my drug habit. Then I’d get my drugs, use, and then it would start all over again the next day”.

Norma has been receiving services at The Wyandot Center in Kansas City, Kansas the past five years. She and her case manager, Heather, started working together when she was homeless. Norma said, “When I was homeless, it was difficult for Heather to find me, she would meet me on the corner of 36th and State Avenue - sometimes I would show up and sometimes I wouldn’t, but Heather hung in there with me.”

After years of being homeless and using drug, Norma finally reached a point where she decided her life needed to change and she would try and go in for treatment of her substance abuse. The night before she was supposed to go to rehabilitation, she was arrested for shoplifting. Upon her release from jail, she went directly to the treatment center. When I asked Norma about how the idea of working evolved for her. Norma responded, “I was in rehab and I knew I needed something to occupy my time when I got out so I wouldn’t go back to using. So I told Heather, my case manager that I needed a job to occupy my time.” She was introduced to her employment specialist, Katie, while she was in rehab and they started
working together and job searching while she was in treatment. Norma talked about reasons she wanted to work in addition to wanting something to do to keep her from using. She wanted a job to help her afford her own place to live, and to establish a bank account and be able to buy stuff instead of “picking stuff up”. Norma also talked to Katie about what she felt she needed in a job. Norma said that she wanted a job without close supervision, wanted to be able to work at her own pace, not around a lot of people, and evening work. Having free time in the evenings and being around a lot of people were triggers for Norma to use. Norma said, “And that’s what we found. I work in the evening, have little or no supervision and I work at my own pace.” Katie was able to assist Norma in clarifying her needs and work preferences in order to move forward in finding a job.

Recovering

Norma got a job as a janitor working in an office building in the evenings. Four months later, she added a second job during the day, 10 hours a day, seven days a week providing companionship to a person with HIV. Norma says, “I would have given up if it weren’t for Katie. She never gave up on me.”

After rehabilitation treatment, Norma went for a short period of time to a residential program for women discharged from substance abuse treatment. From there she went to her own apartment. Norma has been working for 5 months and has been clean for a year.

“It was really working and having something to do that helped me not use and stay substance-free and it was the key for me getting my own place.”

Norma has been able to re-establish a relationship with her daughter and two grandchildren. In fact, Norma is proud that her daughter trusted her enough to let her stay in her house, take care of her grandchildren and let her use her car for a weekend that her daughter went out of town. Norma is happy to in be their life again. Her goals now are to establish a bank account, obtain her driver’s license, and get a car. She was recently offered a supervisory position at the janitorial service where she works, but said she felt that it would be too stressful for her at this time and declined the promotion.

Mental Health Providers: “Don’t Give Up”

Norma says the one thing that she would like others to learn from her situation is for case managers and employment specialists to “not give up on their clients and support them.” Katie, Norma’s employment specialist said that the one thing Norma taught her is to not give up. The lesson here is that people, even in the most desperate of life circumstances, can and do turn their lives around.

The prevalence of addiction is high for people with psychiatric disabilities. Norma’s story is one example of many that shows that work, not only can contribute to recovery with a psychiatric disability, but also with a substance abuse. We would like to thank Norma for her willingness to share her story with us and for her strength and courage to change her life. We would also like to thank Katie and Heather at the Wyandot Center for their role in helping Norma achieve her goals.

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