

CEDAR STAFFER LINKS ALUMNI IN RECOVERY



Obernauer spearheaded creation of national network of addiction treatment alumni groups.

Two-and-a-half years ago, Lorie Obernauer was not yet two years into her recovery from addiction. Intent on helping others facing similar struggles, she was volunteering her time at University of Colorado Hospital's Center for Addiction, Dependency and Rehabilitation (CeDAR). She was, in many ways, forging into new territory, not only in her career, but in her life.

Then CeDAR Executive Director Frank Lisnow, MEd, posed a surprising question to her: would she be interested in starting an alumni program for patients who had completed their treatment?

Obernauer had a background in business and a PhD from the University of Pittsburgh, but no experience in

alumni affairs or organizing an alumni organization. "I was volunteering as part of my recovery," she says. "I said, 'Sure,' but didn't know where I'd begin."

That decision began a dramatic turn, both for Obernauer and for CeDAR. What was originally a part-time position as alumni liaison is now a full-time job. She's tracked down contact information for about half of all the patients who have completed treatment at CeDAR since its opening in 2005, and established a strong core of active alumni with a regular schedule of programs to meet their needs. And now she's taken the lead in creating a national network of addiction treatment alumni programs, Treatment Professionals in Alumni Development (TPAD).

Rapid expansion. The group now numbers about 75 professionals from alumni programs around the country, including prominent treatment facilities like the Betty Ford Center and Hazelden. It began informally only last spring, with emails and phone calls, before Obernauer and about 20 of her colleagues met face to face for the first time in June at a symposium on addictive disorders. This September, TPAD plans organizational meetings at three regional conferences.

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The ultimate goal, Obernauer says, is to create a national non-profit professional organization that can help members build and strengthen their alumni programs by exchanging information about best practices, key legislation, regulatory issues, and more.

She'd also like to cement the role of alumni programs in the lifelong process of addiction recovery. “We want to learn more about what we can do to help define this nebulous thing called ‘recovery,’” she notes.

CeDAR's robust alumni program – Obernauer estimates that 250 to 300 patients are “active in some way” – features weekly support groups, parenting, employment and other workshops, social and recreational activities, movie nights, pot-luck dinners and an annual picnic. All of that does far more than fill people's time, she says.

Good for patients, good for business.

“Isolation is one of the prominent symptoms of addiction,” she remarks. “The alumni program keeps people who are in recovery involved with others and keeps them from backtracking and falling prey to what led to their addiction. Socializing helps them move away from that time. It makes them part of a community.”

Alumni programs also make good business sense, Obernauer says. “Alumni generate a large percentage of our referrals.”

Data from CeDAR and the hospital's Marketing Department show that program alumni were the facility's third-highest source of referral calls through July 2010. Those calls resulted in the second-highest number of admissions.

Despite these strengths, alumni programs have tended to be “afterthoughts” at treatment facilities, Obernauer says. “Most of the effort has been put into what happens to patients while they are [in treatment].”

Indeed, when Obernauer began looking into connecting with her peers, she found no formal umbrella organization for addiction alumni groups. But that didn't mean that the treatment facilities had no interest in starting one, she adds.

“I started meeting with people and networking,” she reports, “and got a resounding message that ‘we need that.’”

New paths. Meanwhile, Obernauer continues to look for more ways to connect those in recovery. She's helped to start CeDAR alumni satellite groups in Colorado Springs and Vail, and is talking to others outside the Denver area.

In June, CeDAR joined a national online community, OneRecovery, that Obernauer calls “Facebook for people in recovery. It offers opportunities for alumni to stay connected with others in recovery through online meetings, discussion groups and other social networking activities.” She says about 100 CeDAR alumni have signed up so far.

All of these avenues fill the same need, Obernauer concludes. “Alumni groups give people [in recovery] a chance to talk to somebody who knows where they’ve been and can say, ‘Here is what I have learned.’”