

CeDAR Ranks Include Large Contingent of Homegrown Talent

Marlyce Bowdish is back where she was three years ago. Life there, however, couldn't be more different than it was.

The hospital hired Bowdish as an admissions assistant at the Center for Dependency, Addiction and Recovery (CeDAR) May 9. She was hardly an off-the-street hire. From January to November 2010 alone, Bowdish put in 565 volunteer hours for CeDAR and has logged nearly 1,000 hours overall.

But Bowdish got to know CeDAR in an even harder way. She was in the program for a 30-day stint in 2008, battling alcoholism and a co-occurring eating disorder.

It's a career path that is becoming well-worn at CeDAR. With Bowdish on board, CeDAR now has seven full-time-equivalent employees (FTEs) who are program alumni. They serve as admissions assistants, addiction techs and behavioral health workers.

Strengths and risks. Alumni bring many strengths as FTEs, says CeDAR Clinical Coordinator Michael Dinneen. "They know the system and can talk about it from experience," he says. "They have gratitude and dedication to CeDAR, and patients are sometimes more apt to listen to them and relate to them better. They can make the experience [recovery] fathomable."

Hiring from within also has advantages for the organization, he says. "It's a great pipeline. We're growing our own. That can be an advantage because we have a very distinct philosophy of care at CeDAR," he notes. "It can be easier to hire someone who is familiar with it than breaking in someone from another institution."

On the other hand, hiring program grads is not without risk, Dinneen acknowledges. Some rehabilitation programs have a policy against hiring alumni, he notes, although the largest, Hazelden, is known for it.

"It's a bit of a gamble," he says, adding not all alumni CeDAR has hired have succeeded as employees. "We've realized we need to be careful, and that we need people who are very grounded in their recovery."



As an admissions assistant, Bowdish handles the necessary admissions paperwork, including patient release information and medical records. It requires a business-like approach, she says, but adds her memories of what it's like to be on the other side of the desk come into play.

"I can empathize with what's going [at admission]," she says. "We're often dealing with terrified patients. I can say, 'I've been where you are. Trust me, it's going to be okay. It won't feel this scary forever.'"

Tough road. Bowdish's transition required time and a show of commitment. Alumni must complete at least one year of sobriety to be considered for employment. After 90 days of recovery, they can apply to volunteer – also a must for anyone who wants to pursue full-time employment with CeDAR.

"We need to see what people are like professionally," explains CeDAR Director of Operations Anne Felton, RN, ND. "We play the length of [volunteer] time by ear."

Alumni now account for about three-quarters of the 40 people who volunteer at CeDAR, adds Volunteer Services Manager Rita Alexander.

All prospective volunteers must first complete an interview with Dinneen and Executive Director Frank Lisnow, MEd. Those who get the go-ahead move on to the hospital's regular volunteer orientation. After that, they have to complete CeDAR's own three-day orientation, Dinneen adds.

"We want to find the people who are going to be around for a while," he says. "We want to make sure their hearts are in it. To make a hire, we're looking for the standout volunteer."

The process of overcoming addiction is difficult in itself, he says. "You're learning to take care of yourself physically. You have to go to meetings and meet with your sponsor. Then you throw in work. Working here doesn't take the place of recovery," he added. "We have to have 'two-hitters' – people who are in recovery and working at a treatment center."

Not for everyone. Not everyone can handle that. "We've had problems here and there," Felton says. "That may be because there are good reasons for requiring more time of sobriety before people start working."

In general, however, the return of alumni to the CeDAR fold, either as volunteers or employees, "feels like a natural progression," she adds. "The change in relationship happens seamlessly."

"It's a work in progress," Dinneen says, "but the benefits have far exceeded any trouble we have had. These are people who really get it and understand CeDAR from the patient's perspective."

That's a description Bowdish is determined to live up to. Before entering CeDAR, she had a successful career in the software industry, but recovery changed her goals and aspirations. She's now working toward earning accreditation as a certified addiction counselor.

"I was so moved by my experience at CeDAR that I wanted to give my time as a volunteer and help others get the same feeling, have that special bond and value the program," she says. "I want them to have the same powerful, life-changing experience."