

CREATIVE CONTINUITY IN MENTAL HEALTH

One nonprofit agency's comprehensive mission to stop the cycle of institutionalization

By Vincent Amendola

CONTINUUM OF CARE

Providing effective recovery-oriented programs in the mental health field requires both ingenuity and dedication.

It is not merely a matter of diagnosis, medication and sending patients on their way; it's about rebuilding a person's life piece by piece, meeting their needs at every stage of the journey, and ensuring that they continue along a path of positive growth. This philosophy is at the heart of **Continuum of Care** in New Haven and all who work and grow in its network, and their level of commitment is unparalleled.

Despite being a 50-year-old, \$40 million dollar business that currently provides care for 2,400 clients and employs 800 individuals, Continuum has largely gone unnoticed by the public due to their lack of advertising. They do not believe in self-promotion. The first time many will see the Continuum logo will be in front of their brand new building on Legion Avenue in New Haven.

And what a building it is: the interior evokes a sense of openness and integration. You will find employees and clients conversing and sharing ideas in the halls. The sense of community, and more so, family, is palpable. As she leads me on a tour, **Deborah Cox**, Continuum's Vice President of Development and Marketing, says that this comradery is what makes Continuum special.

CORPORATE / ORGANIZATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

The first stop on our tour is the conference room, a multi-functional space used for staff meetings and yoga and stress management classes.

"These classes are offered for both patients and

staff members. We encourage methods of improving an individual's wellbeing through natural and holistic means. These are ways of sustaining recovery for many of our clients," says Cox.

We then pass the Facilities Management office.

As Cox explains, this department is a foothold for many referred clients that have been released from hospitals and the judicial system. Often upon exiting these institutions, clients are thrust back into the community without a place to live or work.

One method designed to offer clients valuable, interpersonal work experience is the 1,000-square-foot café and deli that is currently under construction. Continuum will employ its clients and train them in all aspects of the food industry. Clients work in a variety of other departments, such as the agency's donation center, where they sort and distribute furniture and other basic home goods. Moving crews are assembled to help clients settle into their new residential situations.

The third floor is home to the agency's two main departments: Intellectual Disabilities Services (IDS) and Mental Health Services (MHS).

I am first introduced to **Reggie Bok**, Vice President of IDS, who directs my attention to an arrangement of photographs, each depicting a residential building in Continuum's network. The network is comprised of 65 individuals in 15 different locations.

"We get many high-priority referrals. We have



Patti Walker, CEO of Continuum, has guided it from eleven to more than eight hundred employees.

a reputation in state for taking on the most challenging cases," says Bok.

IDS nurtures individuals along the autism spectrum and those with severe cognitive, intellectual, and developmental disabilities. Many have chronic health and behavioral issues, such as diabetes and seizures. The department has a \$10 million budget, and for good reason: intensive care for the many individuals receiving lifelong assistance is not a cheap endeavor.

Across the hall is **James Farrales**, Vice President of MHS.

"Beyond just stabilizing, we figure out the stressors, the root causes...compared to hospitals which have a 5% recidivism rate, we currently have less than 3%," says Farrales.

MHS encompasses treatment and support services for veterans suffering from PTSD, individuals released from long term incarceration, and those recovering from substance abuse.

Farrales recently reconnected with a woman who had found Continuum during a tumultuous period in her life. In just fourteen days, Continuum provided counseling, overturned her eviction, subsidized her payments, and connected

her with a literacy volunteer. In other words, a complete turnaround, and apparently for good: the woman now holds a GED.

Patti Walker is the President and CEO of Continuum of Care—the soft-spoken leader who has been the author of Continuum’s vision for the past 33 years.

“I think we are very creative; we have a medical model mixed with a non-medical model...we now know that people with mental illness die 25 years younger than everybody else, and it’s because they don’t get proper medical care,” says Walker.

The company was founded by three Yale undergraduates, who up until recently had no clue what their original project had blossomed into. In 1966, the undergraduates established the New Haven Halfway House, which was and still is a home for individuals with mental health issues.

In 2001, the need for a better home health program in the state prompted the development of Continuum Home Health (CHH), a sister organization. Many agencies in operation at the

time were out of touch with the needs of their patients and burdening them with expenses. Health insurance spenddowns were also a common problem for people seeking assistance from these agencies.

“We make sure that no matter how long it takes we continue, whether we’re getting paid or not, to provide because we want that continuity of care,” says Walker. “Of course, what’s going to happen if somebody doesn’t get their meds or diabetes taken care of or hypertension addressed? They’re going to wind up in the hospital.”

This charity care is not without its high cost; annually, it creates a \$400 thousand gap in Continuum’s budget which the agency attempts to close through grants and donations.

Continuum’s Recovery Support Specialist (RSS) program offers internships and certification classes for individuals who aspire to become recovery mentors for their peers and stands as a testament to the agency’s creativity.

“Our peers are all folks that have been in recovery, who have gotten more stable, treated

their illnesses, and found ways to be as productive and successful by helping others graduate to the next level of independence,” says Walker.

There are currently 54 peers operating across 7 organizations.

Reimagining inpatient care as a community-based process is the hallmark of Continuum’s work here in the state. Cox explains the need for clients to not only live comfortably but thrive in their communities, especially those with autism.

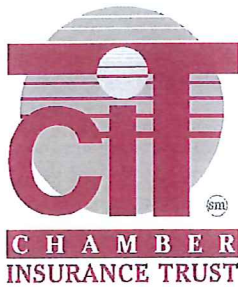
“Autism is so often talked about in a children’s realm, but children age out, and have to carry with them their diagnosis into the world,” says Cox. “Organizations like ours can help businesses understand and work with individuals that they employ.”

Walker explains that by reducing the stigma and stopping the “revolving door” of institutionalization, Continuum not only saves the state over \$10 million a year—real, lasting change is happening for the individuals in our community who need it most.

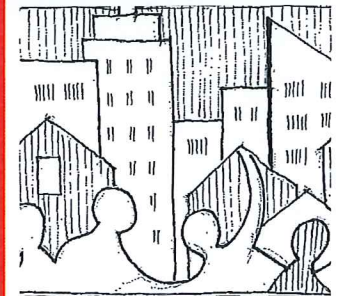
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