

Diversability Award Entrant: Connect Supporting Recovery

Rather than being a barrier to employment, personal experience with mental health or addiction issues is the key to a meaningful career at Connect Supporting Recovery.

A non-government organisation in the wider Auckland and Waikato region, Connect Supporting Recovery focuses on supporting people with mental health and addiction issues. It has 180 staff currently working with more than 1,400 people, providing residential respite and recovery services for those with acute and chronic issues as well as community-based in-home services.

Seven years ago, the company implemented its Intentional Peer Support model to supplement the clinical and medical support its clients receive.

"We employ people with lived personal experience of either mental health or addiction issues to walk alongside others who are experiencing issues," says Connect Supporting Recovery director Jo Copeland.

"Our peer support workers are all a long way along their recovery journey and are trained in intentional peer support methodologies so they can offer help and support where both parties learn from each other."

Not only are the peer support workers able to help others dealing with mental health or addiction issues, they are also given the opportunity to have a meaningful, satisfying career.

"We know how critically important it is for someone with a mental health or addiction issue to remain in employment. It is vital to their recovery," says Jo.

Yet statistics show that people with mental illness are five times more likely to be unemployed than those without issues.

"Some of our employees also have criminal convictions that they received while they were suffering from their addiction and mental health issues, making them even harder to place in employment. We have tried to change those challenges into strengths and given them a career alternative which values, rather than stigmatises, their illness.

"This allows them to become contributing members of society again, gets them out of poverty and improves their self-esteem."

After researching international literature studies on the impact of peer support on recovery rates, Connect Supporting Recovery submitted its first tender to the Waitemata DHB and managed to secure funding to trial a peer-led service called 'Reach Out'.

Successful outcomes from the trial led to further contracts utilising the peer support model and the company now has five distinct services

A couple of years ago, the organisation established Piri Pono, a residential alternative to hospitalisation for people who were suffering from acute mental health issues staffed entirely by people who have had lived experience of recovery from mental health issues.

Connect Supporting Recovery has invested heavily in training to allow people to move from being a recipient of mental health services to being on staff, ready to take on peer support.

“We are mindful that our people all have mental health and addiction issues of their own. This means that we have comprehensive procedures and policies in place which encourage supportive and active management of our staff and allows us to hold the role open for an employee if they suffer a relapse,” Jo says.

The intentional peer support model is now integral to the way Connect Supporting Recovery is managed. A General Manager of Peer Support Services is part of the senior leadership team, on an equal footing with the General Managers of the other services the company provides.

“It is also so important to us that we have now enshrined peer support representation at the Board level, with a requirement in our constitution that we have service user representation on our board,” says Jo.

Peer support has been so successful that it has now become Connect Supporting Recovery’s primary method for delivering services.

Today, 100 per cent of staff delivering the peer services and 70 per cent of the total staff have lived experience with mental health or addiction issues.

“That’s 125 people with mental illness issues in meaningful paid employment,” says Jo.

The initiative has also led to a big cultural shift within the organisation, she says.

“People have gained a far deeper understanding of the issues faced by our clients. It has made the organisation, as a whole, far more authentic, less judgemental and it has solidified the resolve of the people who work in our environment to do whatever it takes to support their client's recovery.”

And the difference it’s made to employees’ lives is immeasurable, she says.

Annemarie has been working as a peer support worker for 15 months. After being diagnosed with Bipolar Affective Disorder at 29, her life became a never-ending cycle of depression, anxiety and mania. She tried to work in between frequent hospitalisations but was eventually forced to leave her job as a registered nurse.

After another admission to hospital, she was offered a bed at Piro Pono, and she found the peer-led service quite different to her previous experiences with mental health services.

“Peers shared their stories about both their positive and negative experiences and their recovery. In this supportive environment I was able to share my story too. I was encouraged to participate in group activities. I learnt new skills to deal with my distress.”

Three months after her stay at Piro Pono, Annemarie joined the team there.

"This opportunity has changed my life. Connect has provided me with hope, support and an employment opportunity that I could only have dreamed of before. I now have a purpose. Fear has been replaced with hope. For me, that can only be a good thing."