



## Community Access

### Community-Based Mental Health Organization, New York

Community Access provides mental health, housing, workforce, and education services to more than 1,500 people annually, many of whom have chronic mental illness or are in recovery from addiction, trauma and abuse. Central to the agency's mission is the belief that "people are experts in their own lives."

It is from this vision that Community Access has pioneered the development of a range of person-centered recovery programs, including affordable housing that integrates families and formerly homeless adults, a peer training academy to support "careers for peers," an art collective, and a respite center for people experiencing psychiatric crisis.

Expanding peer-informed practice that effectively addresses the social determinants of health, such as employment, housing, nutrition, harm reduction, and social inclusion, exemplifies the types of impacts that Vital Healthcare Capital (V-Cap) seeks to catalyze in its investments.

Community Access's crisis respite center is a compelling example: instead of going to an ER, the center offers a warm, home-like environment—complete with living room, garden, kitchen, and private bedrooms. Guests are free to come and go, bring their service animals, and discuss the challenges in their lives with highly trained peers, all of whom share experiences of psychiatric care and the related trauma that is often associated with treatment as usual.

With an average length of stay of seven days, Community Access's respite care has been shown to be more effective in helping people regain their emotional balance and avoid future crises.

Over the course of any given year, one in five adults – or 45 million American adults – experiences some form of mental illness. Yet only 40 percent receive care, largely due to financial concerns, stigmatization, and a lack of clarity on how to get help.

Mental disorders are one of America's most costly conditions, with care expenditures totaling nearly \$60 billion per year. With state mental health programs facing reduced budgets, 19 states now have just one or two state-run psychiatric hospitals, limiting care options and making community-based care models vital.



Community Access has been a leader in training and incorporating people with a lived mental health experience into the workforce. Through an affirmative hiring policy, a third of Community Access' staff have had behavioral health issues.

To expand this effort to the industry at large, Community Access launched Howie the Harp Advocacy Center (HTH) in 1995. HTH is a nine-month training and job internship program for those with a history of mental illness, homelessness, substance abuse, and incarceration. HTH graduates are prepared for a number of human services positions, including crisis workers, care coordinators, health navigators, and life coaches. Celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, HTH has placed more than 1,000 graduates in hospitals, clinics, and prisons, where they lead productive and self-directed lives while advocating for their peers. The model has expanded to the Netherlands, and Community Access is in talks with nonprofits across the United States to open additional programs.

“At the heart of our mission is the respect we have for people who had marginalized in our society. We believe all people have something to contribute to the wellbeing of our communities, if only they are given an opportunity to do so. Our focus is on abilities, not disabilities,” says Steve Coe, CEO of Community Access.

For someone who has spent years in hospitals and shelters, Coe says having a one-on-one conversation with someone who has survived your experiences is transformational. “We see great opportunities to expand our respite care model and workforce training for people with lived mental health experience. It’s exciting that V-Cap will be a source of the critically important upfront financial resources needed to grow these cost-effective programs,” said Coe.

“Community Access’s deep commitment to the dignity of people with mental health experience as consumers and as workers is essential to preserve and grow during a period of major cost pressure on the healthcare system, and represents the kind of model V-Cap funds are intended to support,” said V-Cap CEO Steven Weingarten.