



# DIRECTOR'S NEWSLETTER: Office of Consumer and Family Affairs



Dr. Jei Africa

This October we celebrate the 20th anniversary of BHRS' Office of Consumer and Family Affairs (OCFA). For two decades OCFA has lifted up how valuable the contribution of people with lived experience, or peer support workers (peers), are in our system of care. The role of peers is unique in that it is based on the concept of what SAMHSA calls mutuality - sharing similar experiences. Having someone who has gone through a similar experience can be vital when navigating complex systems. Peers enhance trust and provide relatable and effective support.

Peer support is an evidence-based practice that enhances the work of an individual's clinical care team. We are grateful to our OCFA colleagues - past, present and future!

## Office of Consumer and Family Affairs Overview

OCFA has brought the voice of people with lived experience into BHRS for 20 years. Since its inception, OCFA has worked side by side with clinicians and administrators to ensure that there is "nothing about us without us." OCFA's key roles include:

In behavioral health, peers are individuals who have lived experience with mental health conditions or substance use disorders or family members of those individuals. Peers have long provided support in prevention, early intervention, treatment, recovery and crisis services.

- Supporting peers working in BHRS facilities and in contracted community programs. In addition, the Advocacy and Lived Experience Academies at OCFA have developed a generation of persons with lived experience who bring their voice and expertise into various committees and workgroups at BHRS and in the community.



- Providing information about support and resources available to our consumers/clients and family members, including wellness centers and peer-run organizations available to support treatment and recovery.
- Managing the grievance process for BHRS. Clients or family members of children and youth can file a grievance if they are dissatisfied with services provided by BHRS or one of our providers. OCFA receives the grievance, speaks directly to the complainant and then facilitates an investigation into the complaint and provides a resolution.

## 20 Years Ago, San Mateo County Establishes OCFA



Below, revisit the 2004 memo appointing the late Linford Gayle as consumer affairs coordinator. During his time with BHRS, Linford created a multicultural and diverse team of individuals with lived experience as clients or family members, based in trust, compassion, collaboration and respect. He was a leader in transforming BHRS, always advocating for persons with lived experience to be hired and integrated throughout San Mateo County. Linford was in his role for 14 years before he retired in 2017. He was a nationally known speaker, served statewide as the chair of the California MHSA Oversight and Accountability Committee and was part of the BHRS management team.

To: Mental Health Board  
Mental Health Program Supervisors

From: Gale Bataille, Mental Health Director

Subject: Mental Health Consumer Affairs Coordinator

Date: February 21, 2004

San Mateo County Mental Health Services (SMCMHS) was fortunate to hire Linford Gayle as our first Consumer Affairs Coordinator in early January 2004. Linford was the Ombudsman for San Francisco County Behavioral Health Services prior to accepting this new and challenging position in San Mateo County. This position was created to promote the active and meaningful involvement of mental health consumers, family members and parents in all aspects of the mental health system. This new Office of Mental Health Consumer and Family Member Affairs will be expanded to include the roles of family advocate, parent partner and additional peer/client advocates as additional resources can be directed/re-directed. Approximately 6-7 other California Counties have similar consumer leadership positions.

The Consumer Affairs Coordinator has two broad areas of responsibility: promoting and coordinating consumer involvement throughout SMCMHS and, investigating and resolving consumer complaints/grievances regarding community mental health services. Examples of each of these major areas follow.

**Promote consumer and family member involvement in SMCMHS.** Organize and insure involvement of consumers in mental health planning, program development and evaluation activities.

**Lead and participate in initiatives regarding wellness/resilience/recovery.** Provide leadership and staff support to wellness and recovery initiatives including: co-chair MHB Wellness and Recovery Public Forum planning committee; and develop and chair/co-chair “Wellness and Recovery Task Force.”

**Develop Office of Consumer and Family Member Affairs.**

**Track/monitor and respond to client complaints and grievances regarding SMCMHS.**

## Dr. Jana Spalding Takes the Helm of OCFA

The Office of Consumer and Family Affairs welcomed a new director in April, Dr. Jana Spalding. Dr. Spalding brings an extensive history of experience in peer support, peer support training, promoting recovery and the inclusion of peers in various behavioral health and academic settings. She is a graduate of the Stanford University School of Medicine and a person with lived experience in recovery from her own severe mental illness.



Her personal recovery journey started with bewildering and terrifying thoughts and emotions during medical residency, which, in denial from the diagnosis, she attempted to control but failed miserably at. With hindsight, Dr. Spalding sees that her hope for freedom from the internal torture and chaos began in an inpatient crisis unit when an inner voice said “you have always lived through your intellect and your will. That’s not working. It’s time to learn to live from your heart.”

She had to overcome her pride, shame, guilt and disappointment in herself just to call and make an appointment to ask for help. Eventually she did, and help came from doctors, medications, therapists, counselors, family who did their best despite not understanding and most impactfully, from her peers. Dr. Spalding was ashamed and full of self-hatred, judging her life as a full-time professional patient depending on social security as a failure and not the way it should have been.

Dr. Spalding shares her experience of recovery and the transformative power of peer support, “My peers, who had lived through challenges like mine and were moving through various stages of recovery, did not see me as the failure I believed I was. They accepted me and I accepted them; it was us, not them vs. me, wrong vs. right, successful vs. losers. We were each who we were, and that was OK. We were all suffering and in various stages of distress most of the time. Amazingly, recovery develops and grows right alongside the suffering, the confusion and the bad decisions. It’s not linear and there are usually setbacks and relapses.”

Skilled peer support is a service that consistently results in positive outcomes, including:



**Increased  
Engagement**



**Reduced  
Hospitalizations**



**Cost  
Reduction**



**Empowerment and  
Self-Esteem**



**Improved  
Whole Health**

There are 18 Medi-Cal certified peer support specialists in BHRS and 16 working with community-based organizations. Five members of the Lived Experience Education Workgroup (LEEW) are also certified.

Peer specialists have a crucial role within BHRS as peer support provides a unique addition to traditional services already being provided in the system. Dr. Spalding shares, “The goal of a recovery organization is to create an environment where each individual discovers the power they already have within, to seek and accept help for symptom relief, to learn skills, to remain open to trying new treatments, new activities, lifestyle changes and changes in thinking that will help them achieve the lives they want to live. When people are treated without judgement and instead with kindness, dignity and respect for their strength and value, a safe and inviting space is created for people to do the work required to be well.”

Another important function of OCFA is the management of client and family grievances, which aims to resolve concerns or problems about individual rights relating to BHRS services received. Grievances at BHRS are managed by people with lived experience. Dr. Spalding notes, “Who better to listen to complaints and supervise investigations than people who have themselves experienced falling through the cracks in the systems?” The OCFA team expertly



From left: Eric Santos, Jairo Wilches, Yahaira Ortega, Dr. Jana Spalding, Yolanda Ramirez, Claudia Saggese.

navigates the grievances process with empathy and respect while following legal and policy standards. The final step of the process is a resolution letter that challenges both the complainant and the provider(s) to create better environments of care and better working relationships with each other. The process is intended to shine light on areas where we can do better in treating our clients and to where system shortcomings can be addressed and improved.

Dr. Spalding’s career of recovery began in a community mental health center with services funded by Medicaid, and in a consumer run organization funded by its county’s discretionary fund, before peer support and consumer run agencies could bill Medicaid. “It is my privilege to be able to contribute at this level on behalf of those who are now in their journey where I was 30 years ago,” shared Dr. Spalding. She is excited by the opportunities ahead and the high quality of work that comes out of OCFA. She continues, “I am honored to join BHRS where there is a bright future for persons with lived experience working throughout the agency, not only in peer support, but in clinical positions, IT, finance, human resources, administration and more. It has been so encouraging for me to see that this work has been going on for decades at BHRS.” Dr. Spalding concluded by saying, “I’ve only been here five months, but I can confidently say the commitment to our client’s recovery and to the value persons with lived experience bring to that commitment is real here in San Mateo County.”

**Dr. Jana Spalding is the director of the Office of Consumer and Family Affairs.** For more information about OCFA, please visit [smchealth.org/support-clients-family](https://smchealth.org/support-clients-family).

## BHRS Peers Reflect on Their Role

### **BHRS peer and family support specialists:**

**Peer support specialists:** Cristian Ruiz, Desiree Bryand, Janice Fernandez, Jose Cabrera, Justin Quan, Lee Harrison, Melissa Troche, Michelle Blade, Renee Harris, Richard Grunert and Sydney Reynolds.

**Family peer support specialists\*:** Cindy Jimenez, Sayda Ceron, Iliana Solis, Sisilia Fifita, Sonia Vasquez, Karen Chavez and Grace Siliezar.

\*Family support is peer specialization that provides support to parents and caregivers of children with behavioral health conditions.

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I began my journey with San Mateo County's Human Services Agency in Children and Family Services 18 years ago. For the past two years, I have worked with Behavioral Health and Recovery Services at the North County Youth Clinic as a family partner and during my first year, I obtained my Medi-Cal Peer Support Specialist certification. I have personal experience supporting a loved one through their mental health challenges. I enjoy my role because it allows me to help and support families with youth facing mental health concerns. I share parts of my lived experience with the families I work with, so they know I understand their concerns and that I am there to support them as a peer. It is a truly rewarding job.



**By Cindy Jimenez**, Peer Support Specialist II at the North County Youth clinic.



My name is Sonia Vasquez and I am a parent with lived experience. I worked with the BHRS Transition Age Youth Team for three years and have been working with the BHRS Coastside Clinic for nearly three years as a family support specialist. In this role, I've had the privilege of assisting families with children facing mental health, emotional or behavioral challenges, helping them navigate the child-serving system. I'm grateful to be able to create a safe and supportive environment where families can express their emotions and receive validation and empathy. I encourage families to build their support system, as friends and family members can also provide practical help, such as assisting with daily tasks, which can reduce stress and enhance mental well-being.

**By Sonia Vasquez**, Peer Support Specialist II at the Coastside clinic.

## And Now, a Word From Our Clients

Craig P. has been a client of BHRS since 1982.

### How has working with a peer support specialist impacted your life?

Craig: Working with a peer support specialist has helped me feel supported in advocating for myself. Knowing that I have a person who has lived experience has made me more self-aware. One of the ways I've been helped is to learn how to socialize through a peer support specialist re-social group. This group has helped me understand different self-care practices through meditation and yoga. I have always struggled with social isolation and the group has supported me.

### What are some of the outside community programs a peer support specialist has helped connect you with?

Craig: Working with a peer support specialist has helped me connect to the outside community. I found the local Senior Center here in Daly City, and attending the Senior Center helps me be physically fit and maintain my mental health through staying active.

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Tim C. has been a client of BHRS since 1985.

### How has working with a peer support specialist impacted your life?

Tim: Working with a peer support specialist has helped me with socialization. I have struggled with social isolation for 35+ years. My peer support specialist has helped me be able to share more about my recovery journey. I have flourished and formed friendships with other BHRS clients. The support has allowed me to advocate with my case managers & doctor.

### What are some of the outside community programs a peer support specialist has helped connect you with?

Tim: My peer support specialist has supported me by helping me get connected with food resources through the Meals on Wheels and Senior Food Pantry program and by encouraging me to attend weekly groups and movie nights.

From left: Craig P., Tim C. and BHRS Peer Support Specialist II Justin Quan.



## October Events

**NAMI Walk:** Please join BHRS Saturday October 5 from 9 a.m. - 1 p.m. for the [NAMI Walk at Seal Point Park](#), San Mateo. At the [link here](#), you can individually donate and share our team link with your network to raise funds.

**Board of Supervisors Proclamation:** Please join the Board of Supervisors meeting on Tuesday [October 8](#) from 9 a.m. - 1 p.m. for the proclamation recognizing peer support specialist's impact and celebrating the 20th anniversary of OCFA.

**Global Peer Support Celebration Day:** This annual day of celebration and recognition highlights the impact and contributions peers make in the lives of those who are facing behavioral health challenges. This worldwide event takes place on October 17 this year.