

# BHDDH SPOTLIGHT

## SARAH SAINT LAURENT



As BHDDH’s Administrator of Peer Based Recovery Support Services, Sarah Saint Laurent has a long list of responsibilities, but she has no trouble staying focused on what’s important.

Even as she manages contract procurements, oversees provider certifications and assesses the needs of the recovery workforce, she finds herself asking the same question: How is this impacting the people who need help?

For Saint Laurent, the question has special significance.

From the age of 11 until she turned 18, Saint Laurent was on the receiving end of state services, as a ward of Rhode Island’s foster care system. She saw firsthand how actions by state agencies impact the people they serve. She saw that when programs and services work well, people are helped. And when programs don’t work well, people suffer.

“I keep that with me,” she says. “What has guided me through all of the work I have done for the state is remembering what it’s like to be on the other side. I know that everything I do in my job impacts people.”

Among her colleagues at BHDDH, Saint Laurent is known for wanting to get things done. Her supervisor, Candace Rodgers, recalls her efforts to organize a Leadership Fellows Academy for people who lead peer recovery provider organizations. The eight-month training program, which kicked off in July, required about 18 months of preparation, and naturally, not all the prep work went as planned.

When legal questions delayed a key contract, Saint Laurent moved forward, identifying, for instance, the topics to be covered and how much time would be needed.

When the contract was finally signed, the vendor incorporated Saint Laurent’s work.

“They basically took what she developed and ran with it,” Rodgers said.

Saint Laurent started working for the state during the spring of 2016, applying after a friend told her there was an opening for a Healthy Transitions Youth Coordinator. Under guidelines from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the grant-funded position required someone with a four-year degree as well as lived experience.

Brenda Amodei, then BHDDH’s Healthy Transitions Grant Project Director, recalls being impressed with Saint Laurent’s resume, which indicated she had the required four-year degree as well as the lived experience. She was also impressed with Saint Laurent herself.

“She was so articulate and so bright, you just knew,” Amodei said.

Today, one of Saint Laurent’s core duties as Administrator of Peer Based Recovery Support Services is to address performance concerns and make sure providers are meeting their obligations. With her lived experience and her training as a social worker and a peer recovery specialist, she knows firsthand the challenges recovery providers face. While clinicians and social workers have college degrees, the peer recovery specialists who work alongside them take a certification examination after 46 hours of training and a 500-hour internship.

That’s why Saint Laurent thought leaders in recovery organizations would benefit from the Leadership Fellows Academy. Based on her vision for the training, the first four months is focusing on technical leadership skills such as nonprofit governance, data management and workforce development, while the second four will focus on developing the capacity of organizations to adapt and thrive in the face of challenges and preparing them to take on the process of change.

So far, she’s impressed with the results.

“People are learning so much and they’re thinking about their roles as leaders in their organizations in completely different ways,” she said. “They’re also learning about each other and learning from each other, which helps them to see each other as allies, rather than direct competitors. I’m hoping this results in a unified group of advocates in recovery who can work together to identify a collective set of priorities and a unified strategy for achieving them.”

In other words, she’s hoping they will be better equipped to help the people who need recovery services. Which, of course, is the point.

“My experience in foster care will never leave me,” she said. “With every single decision we make, I ask, ‘how is this going to impact the person who uses this service?’”