

FolkTime

WHEN DISCUSSIONS BEGAN IN 2005, THE OREGON WARMLINE would only operate for 5 hours a week. Mental Health advocates David Romprey and Angel Prater were working with Community Counseling Solutions (CCS) to launch the Warmline and brought in Lenora Kimble in 2007 to introduce Intentional Peer Support (IPS) with a three day overview. By October of 2008 their working hours had expanded to 5 hours a day. With its expansion the Warmline was renamed, becoming the David Romprey Oregon Warmline in remembrance of David, who died suddenly in July of 2008.

Recently, the Warmline added 10 people to their team of call operators, thanks to a partnership with FolkTime which, according to my guest today, has tripled the number of calls they've been able to direct connect with! Callers regularly waited 1 hour for a call back but after leaping from 4 operators to 9 operators many callers are now receiving direct access. For the first time the Warmline has been optimized to support the best customer experience.

I met with Sharon Kuehn, Program Manager for CCS's Warmline and Senior Peer Outreach, and spoke with her about the Warmline and this new partnership with FolkTime.

NICOLE: It looks like CCS grew out of what began as a "local mental health authority" for Morrow County back in the 1970's. After several iterations it became a non-profit and began the Oregon Warmline 2008. Were you there back then? Is the Warmline your baby?

SHARON: I've been working just over 3 years with the Warmline. I did a lot of work in California, I was a previous executive director of the California Network of Mental Health Clients. I was originally brought up to Oregon in 2014 to become the executive director of Mental Health Association of Oregon, now MHAAO. And then I briefly worked for the Oregon Health Authority as the peer reviewer for the development of the CCBHCs which were the Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics, a model for a new way that behavioral health was delivered - alongside primary, or physical, healthcare. That was how I got exposed to some of the agencies in Eastern Oregon and that's actually how I reviewed Community Counseling Solutions and, as you know, Angel [Prater, Executive Director of FolkTime] was in that role originally. I'm not sure actually what year Angel started, sometime near the beginning, pitching and doing a lot of community outreach in the counties. She was getting it [the Warmline] valued in a lot of counties, which led to the eventual statewide block grant funding that we currently have. But I did not take over the role until 2017 after Angel left. Angel and I know each other from way back because I was one of the co-developers of the "SPIRIT Training," which stands for Service Provider Individualized Recovery Intensive Training and, which was a peer support specialist training that was very well respected in California. We developed it out of Contra Costa County which was the place where I worked in the role of consumer empowerment manager for about 7 years.

NICOLE: And was that training related to IPS or not?

SHARON: It was not IPS but during those days, between 2000 and 2007, it was in the early development of IPS. I actually met Shery Mead during that period. We got really involved in Wrap in Contra Costa County and when I would do a Wrap training with Mary Ellen in Vermont we would visit Shery Mead's peer respite in New Hampshire. Shery was actually pretty active in the Wrap movement in the early

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days. But Angel and I had met at an Alternatives conference. Someone introduced us because they were like, “this lady’s teaching SPIRIT up in Oregon!” And we were doing it in California. When she was deciding that she had been giving the Warmline her love and care for so many years and was ready to do something else, she was the one that actually informed me that about the opportunity to apply because she was trying to think of people who had strong skills.

NICOLE: Can you tell us what a Warmline is and how that is different from what people call a suicide or crisis line?

SHARON: Sure, a Warmline is a peer support service in which peers are available to connect with whoever calls, for whatever reason. I think we’ve said something like, “Whoever you are and whatever you may be going through, you are welcome on the Warmline.” One really unique aspect of the service is that its preventative in nature so we don’t screen, or require any kind of diagnosis, and we don’t identify any kind of person that should receive the peer support that we have to offer. For myself, one of the things that I really love about being part of the Warmline is that its peer support at its purest.

It’s not a crisis service although we occasionally get callers who are experiencing crisis. The majority of our callers are simply calling because they’re lonely, isolated, shut-in, feeling depressed, having relationship problems, or just wanting someone to give them their quality attention and listen.

NICOLE: So someone could actually call and say, “Hi, how’s it going? I’m feeling really good today!”

SHARON: Oh yeah! It’s not like every person is calling for some big reason. In fact we have a very large group that we call our “Warmline Family,” right? People that call just because it’s part of their day to have a connection. People in our world are not well connected and when they talk to people they don’t feel heard, so what they are really calling for is to be heard.

NICOLE: Does the Warmline share common goals with CCS?

SHARON: I would say the common goal is to make authentic connection available to everyone. We really believe in the importance of connection and relationships, those having been essential to our own wellbeing, and we believe in the value of making that available to others. When I say connection I mean that we are not going to judge, assume that we know better for someone, give them advice, or tell them what to do. All of that is really important to us because being able to take a look at your own life and circumstances and make your own decisions is really enhanced by being connected to an attentive other. If you think about a society that excludes people who are on the margins, and a lot of us have had an experience of feeling excluded or judged, the service we provide is creating an environment in which everyone is valuable and everyone deserves to be treated with care and attention. Because this is so important to us, we create that for ourselves and others.

NICOLE: How long has the Warmline been using Intentional Peer Support?

SHARON: I believe it’s been at least since the start up. I mean Angel could probably answer that question better than I, because she was there so much earlier. But everything I’ve ever seen seems to reference Intentional Peer Support. I’ve noticed in the early materials from the Warmline you can see the evolution of Intentional Peer Support taking place because they didn’t even have the same 3

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principles that we have now. It looks to me like it's been in line with Intentional Peer Support from the beginning but may have also evolved as IPS evolved.

NICOLE: And Angel is, of course, so involved with IPS. It makes me wonder which came first, did her passion grow from using IPS with the Warmline? Or did she bring IPS to the Warmline? Do you have any idea?

SHARON: I can say that I've been involved with a lot of peer support programs and activities over the years and I was so excited about this job partly because of the focus on IPS. You know, peer support can be done in many different ways. But when I say this is pure peer support, I'm kind of referencing the fact that using IPS allows us to really focus on the aspect of what happens in relationship when we actually achieve a state of thinking of ourselves as equals, without imposing an agenda. I think that revolutionary aspect of IPS is what makes it so valuable. I know Angel says it's about how to be rather than what to do, but there are tasks, there are principles, there is an activity around IPS that doesn't exist in a lot of other peer support trainings. There's clear direction on how to deepen the relationship. I guess what I'm saying is that IPS is exciting and it is unique compared with other peer support. I think every other form of peer support leaves a lot more room for the mistake of assuming that you know best for someone, or the agenda that you have in your role is to get people to do a certain thing, or to presume a person needs to focus on their recovery in this certain format. In IPS you are really just focusing on the relationship, the connection, the co-learning. It is just possible to achieve something very, very different and it is revolutionary. Because if those ways of interacting could cycle out into the world and more people acted with each other in that way, we'd have a completely different society.

NICOLE: Can you tell me or give me some example of what you're talking about?

SHARON: So much of our society, people assume levels of expertise in different things and once you are "the knower" you know what's best. People who are marginalized all the time are interfacing with different "knowers" who are always telling them what to do. And it's so rich to actually come from a place of not knowing, and wonder, and curiosity.

NICOLE: How many calls on average does was the Warmline getting prior to COVID-19?

SHARON: We were averaging between 85 and 120 calls a day.

NICOLE: Do you get calls from outside of the state? Do you deal with them differently?

SHARON: Yes we do. We log them all. Logging all calls was Angel's advocacy before my time. They forced the Warmline to cut back to only accepting Oregon prefixes and there were complaints because people living here had other cell phone numbers. Her advocacy allowed us to take phone calls from any number. We do have regular callers from other states. It's one of those issues where it would be great to figure out how to get funding from every state that calls us but we certainly don't have that.

NICOLE: Can you tell us a little bit about the typical call?

SHARON: Sure, there is a huge variety of calls with different experiences that happen, and the operators have a wide range. If you get an operator today you may get someone whose been doing that for 12 years, or you may get someone whose having their first or second day. The peer is going to greet them.

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If it is a first time call they [the operator] are going to explain that they do peer support, that's what they're there for, differentiating from therapy or advice service. And the calls are guided to be about 20 minutes long. If there is someone who is calling in emotional distress, or in any state of crisis, we'll give them longer. So, it's adaptable in that way. Sometimes the calls are shorter. Someone's just calling to kind of check in, to share a little time, and they don't need a whole 20 minutes. But 20 minutes is kind of the average. And more than anything it's guided by the IPS framework so they're connecting, they're exploring worldviews. Sometimes callers just talk, talk, talk and you can barely get two words in. Sometimes callers are quiet and you have to really do a little exploration to help them open up. It's really guided by the desire to create something that is mutual. People do that a bit differently. When you've made a really good connection, it would certainly be easier for that connection to last more than 20 minutes. They [operators] could either say at the beginning, "Well, I'm really looking forward to sharing these 20 minutes exploring this with you," or after 15 minutes, "Well, we have about 5 more minutes to finish what we're talking about today." They have to get comfortable with giving those cues. Because the caller isn't going to necessarily naturally adapt to that timeframe.

NICOLE: How do the operators feel about the work they do?

SHARON: I think the operators take a great deal of pride in providing a necessary service. I think most of them feel motivated by a sense of purpose, of giving back or making that caring community available. I think people have a really good feeling about knowing that they're doing something that is making life better and easier for other people. I think that's the common thread.

NICOLE: And since these are phone calls, can it be done from anywhere?

SHARON: Our design of the program has been office based. We've had six offices that people have worked from. There have been some accommodations to allow a person to work from home but in general it's all been office based until this pandemic.

NICOLE: So do you think you'll go back to the office based model now?

SHARON: I think it's going to be really tough to go back to the office based thing. There are advantages either way. Partly, it's been really challenging bringing new people on without the advantages of the office structure. A new person could listen to their peers doing some calls before they did their own, or they could ask, "What do you do when this happens?" I don't think we're going to chuck it, but I think there are questions. It seems like those are going to be internal decisions that need to be made. That will be a really good topic of discussion at our next meeting. This has definitely been an exciting period and it's shown us what we can do. And, when you think about it, trying to be very careful with public funds, does it make sense to spend those funds on an office? It seems like we might be able to do some different things with that money - like hire more peers.

NICOLE: You mentioned that you had a relationship to FolkTime before this partnership, is there anything more you'd like to elaborate on?

SHARON: Honestly the relationship with FolkTime has been greatly enhanced and deepened by the formation of the Oregon IPS Hub and all the work that we've done with them. I've felt a very strong affiliation with FolkTime. I don't know if you knew that but I've done quite a few of the trainings with

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Danielle and even a couple with Angel. In terms of their collaboration with community partners, I think I have done more trainings with the hub than any other community partner.

NICOLE: So, you've actually co-facilitated trainings with Danielle?

SHARON: Yes, I have done that about 10 times. When they formed the hub we wanted to partner because IPS is such an important part of what we do. It's just been an important part for me personally, I love doing trainings, and developing my skills to do IPS training has been really important to me.

NICOLE: How have things been with the additional staff?

SHARON: It has been a great help to our teams to have the additional peers who are trained in IPS. When they first came on it was just like being able to exhale. And it's been fun getting to know some of them a little bit.

NICOLE: So would you say things are running smoothly?

SHARON: I do! I think it's running pretty well. And we've also been so busy I don't think we've taken as much time as we normally would to check in with each new person. I think that given we've taken people out of a job that they are familiar with, and put them into something else, the fact that we're doing so well, is great. And it's a total blessing to us, so I feel nothing but gratitude.

NICOLE: So what happens as the state re-opens when FolkTime staff returns to their direct service work? Will that be kind of hard?

SHARON: It is gonna be hard! I don't know if the sequencing of things opening up will be kind of gradual so that at least we might give them up a few at a time. But if we lost them it would feel like a huge loss. Having those additional staff on has allowed us to have that capacity to enable direct pickups. When I look at our call center software and can see that there are seven people on calls and no one waiting in the cue, that's is...its beautiful! We love that! We're really going to miss that when they go. I mean I can't even tell you how much that has just been wonderful, and there is no way in the world that we could have hired a group as fast – the collaboration and having it happen so fast, it was great!

NICOLE: What do you think COVID-19 may mean for the future of the Warmline?

SHARON: I think that this situation has brought to light how important it is to have support and connection available by phone. I think it's highlighted the value of what we provide. I think that there is a lot of uncertainty going forward and I think that this kind of a service will continue to be highly valuable. And as we've seen through this period a large number of new callers are calling us. I think that even when some things are opened up there are still going to be people struggling with fears, and anxiety, and loss. And I think this service is going to stay important.

NICOLE: And what are your feelings about the partnership with FolkTime?

SHARON: I love that we've been able to partner. I think it shows flexibility and trust on both sides to take the risk of doing something unknown. I think it was smart. I think it demonstrated our desire to do the best thing for people and not to be entrenched in ownership. I think that it's been a beautiful process. We're doing something new and it's having some real benefit. It's been very beneficial to the

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Warmline, to our ability to shorten wait times and offer callers a variety of people. It would make me happy if we were able to make this a long term arrangement. I really like having the larger team on. It's been amazing! Just the process of going through the orientation with the new peers, your folks, I mean it was really fun. A lot of great people. I think that our two organizations share the same heart and the same desire to create accessible, connected, caring community. I think that it's great that we were able to act on that shared sense of purpose to do something new. Hopefully the FolkTime peers feel like it's been valuable for them. It's been valuable to us. And I look forward to hearing from more of them now that they've been on the lines a little longer to see what their experience has been.