

Pathways to Wellness Data & Lessons Learned What Works to House People with Co-occurring Disorders

We are all aware of the struggles to house people in our community. Through a growing focus, learning, and coordination we have made monumental strides as a community towards rapid rehousing, and yet some people visibly and consistently fail to access or succeed in housing. We opened Pathways to Wellness, in partnership with Santa Cruz County Mental Health, as an 18-month demonstration project to assess what it might take to move the needle with people who were unhoused, had co-occurring Mental Health Diagnosis with a Substance Abuse Disorder and were treatment resistant.

Opening in January of 2019, Pathways operated fully as designed until March of 2020, then was converted to virtual services until it was closed due to budget restrictions related to COVID in October of 2021.

We learned powerful lessons about what works with treatment resistant people. We hope that as our community looks to transformational investment in ending homelessness the lessons of Pathways can be shared, understood and put into practice to scale.

Here's why: As a start-up, with the most challenging subset of our local unhoused population, during extraordinarily difficult conditions, and falling 3 months short of the original timeframe, Pathways to Wellness exceeded every program success benchmark, and some by a huge margin. We encourage you to review this summary information, and we welcome the continued dialogue about what is possible in our common goal to truly end all homelessness in our community.

Pathways Design & Purpose

Our idea was that intensive, strength based, wholistic programming that met people where they were and provided them with a pathway from the street to one of the many excellent local systems in place, would dramatically improve our community's results with this population.

1. Assist homeless adults with co-occurring mental health and substance abuse challenges in achieving stabilization and recovery, with an emphasis on treatment resistant participants.

2. Provide participants with a safe, voluntary and therapeutic space 7 days a week to heal from street induced trauma, build their strength and engage in meaningful activities.
3. Assist participants in community integration through structured volunteering, work training and socialization activities.
4. In 3 months, help participants stabilize from the challenges of homelessness, acute mental health challenges and addiction to start their long-term recovery journey.
5. Reduce psychiatric hospital and jail visits for participants.
6. Help participants avoid the loss of housing due to a substance abuse relapse and increased mental health challenges.

Pathways Produced Measurable Results

With high-stakes, intensive program testing an innovative approach, we understood that clearly defined practical measures of success were critical to establishing effectiveness of our approach.

Results Benchmark 18 Month Summary	Goal	Actual
Program participants enrolled	45	81
Participants successfully complete at least 3 substantive training, vocational or volunteer activities	30	45
People successfully graduate from the program – retained for at least 3 months, exit to employment, housing or school.	15	65
% of enrollees who successfully graduate	50%	80%

Notes on participant retention and enrollment: The average length of participation was 4 months and 4 days. The average length of participation calculated by the median was 3 months and 3 days (93 days). We were able to serve so many more people without increasing costs or staffing because after an initially brief period of time in the program, a great many people were able to sustain early results with attendance of less than 7 days a week. **We served MORE people, and got BETTER results within our original budget!**

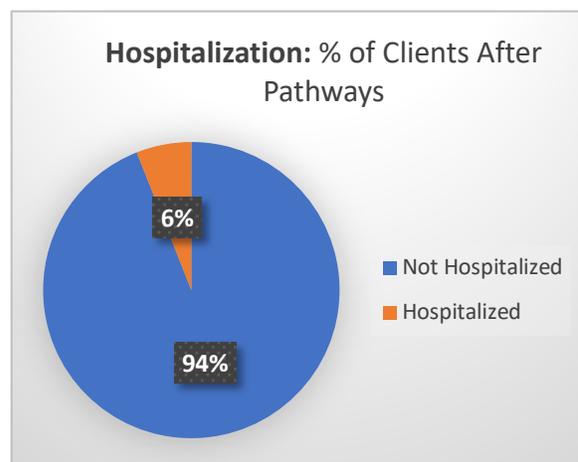
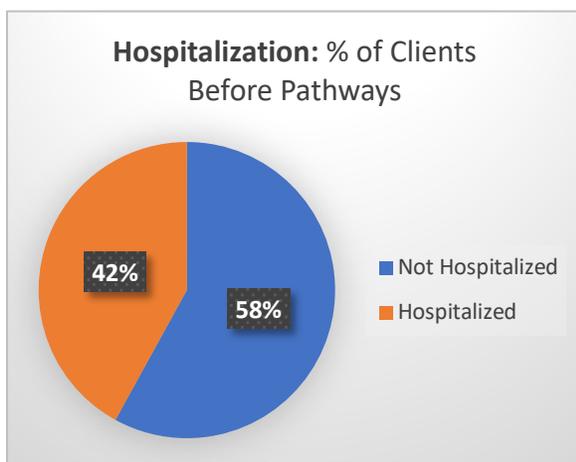
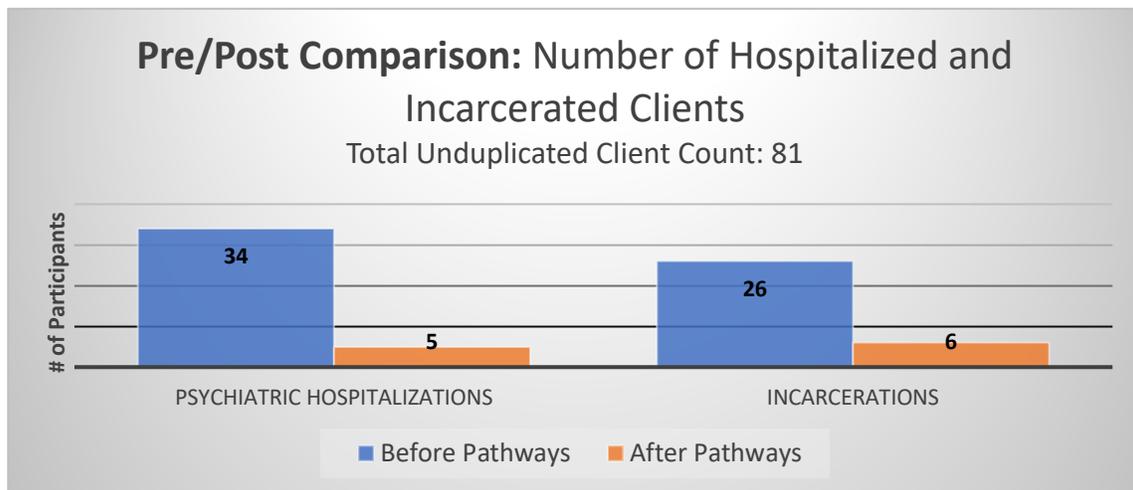
Notes on substantive, strength-based activities: We were surprised that, given consistent supports and guidance on demand, people rapidly graduated from Pathways and Community Connection “Sheltered and Training” activities to full community engagement. Our baseline goals were to get people to explore new opportunities, stabilize, and get connected to ongoing supports and many people achieved lasting results well beyond our original goals before leaving Pathways.

- 8 participants completed a work training program with Community Connection
- 44 participants engaged in at least 3 community volunteer activities
- 13 participants received competitive employment
- 7 participants attended community college

- 3 participants completed their GED
- 18 Participants retained housing as a result of participation in the Pathways program.
- 22 participants received long-term housing after entering the program homeless.

Strong Outcomes: Pathways Significantly Reduces Hospitalizations and Incarcerations

In terms of both community impact and wise use of funds, we knew that it was important to design the program to impact hospitalizations and incarcerations. Our intent was to establish baseline data in the pilot for evaluation, and to set goals should the program move beyond the pilot. Every Pathways participant enrolled was polled for their record of hospitalizations and jail admissions 6 months prior to enrollment and for 6 months during/after enrollment.





What does this mean for our community?

This innovative, 18-month Pilot Program was not sustained with local funding after the grant ended due to the COVID economic crisis. As we emerge and take up the work of making wise, data driven decisions about the best use of public and private dollars, please consider this:

- In fiscal year 2019-20, the weekly cost for a participant in a Psychiatric Hospital was **\$9,738**.
- In fiscal year 2019-20, the weekly cost for a participant in a state hospital was **\$3,007**.
- In 2018, the weekly cost for a participant in jail was **\$1,257**.
- **In fiscal year 2019-20, the weekly cost for a participant in the Pathways to Wellness program was \$574.**

Pathways was a cost-effective approach to supporting adults in stabilization and recovery while yielding greater outcomes for participants than locked institutions. When we close a cost-effective, data-driven program that is proven to reduce hospitalization and incarceration rates, and replace it with nothing, **we are saving absolutely no money!** We have an opportunity to make different investment choices with our public funds.

Challenging the stories we tell ourselves about what works:

- After receiving support from Pathways, a surprising number of people were able to make significant gains beyond baseline stabilization and stages of early recovery. A significant group of treatment resistant participants surpassed the traditional recovery curve, transitioning swiftly from the stabilization phase to independent living through attainment of housing, employment, socialization and community integration. **Might the stories we tell ourselves about “treatment resistance” really be in part about access, quality or intensity of services offered?**
- Avoiding the loss of housing is the County’s top strategy for investment in our plan for addressing homelessness. Pathways to Wellness expanded its services after noticing that a significant number of people in the mental health system were at-risk of losing housing because of challenges related to co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders. Pathways quickly adapted services to address the barrier of housing retention

for individuals with co-occurring challenges. This adaptive approach allowed Pathways to serve as an avenue to housing for individuals experiencing homelessness and a resource of maintaining housing for recently housed individuals at-risk of becoming homeless. **Could Pathways approach to providing intensive smart, flexible supports across mental health, substance abuse treatment and housing systems for people with Co-occurring Disorders be far more cost effective, easy to scale and less stigmatizing than costly, siloed programs?**

- Participants naturally sought and successfully engaged in meaningful activity when they were provided with a safe space that included healthy food, peer navigation and a supportive structure. Participants gave consistent feedback to program staff about how much they relied on our space for their recovery. The simple foundation of removing barriers, stigma and access to resources transformed the lives of individuals living on the streets. **Should we re-examine locked settings and compelled programming in favor of whole person, strength-based programming with investment in sufficient supports to succeed?**

The Story Behind the Data – One Person’s Pathway to Wellness

A familiar face waits patiently outside the doors of Community Connection in the early morning hours after another cold night of sleeping on the bench in the adjacent park. Similar to most participants in the Pathways to Wellness program, Jon enters the doors of Community Connection in search of a safe, warm and supportive space. Silently he signs in and searches for his first cup of warm coffee. After greeting everyone, he settles inside the “cocoon,” as the Pathways to Wellness group meeting space is affectionately called, puts his head down for a few minutes to rest, and waits for the first group of the day to begin. Jon has maintained this routine 5-6 days per week, since January of 2019; and in so doing, has become the most consistent, supportive, and longest-term participant in the Pathways to Wellness program.

Despite the oppressive challenges of his situation, Jon used the tools, support and counseling provided by the Pathways program to maintain sobriety and stabilize his mental health challenges while experiencing homelessness. Jon made a decision to move himself towards a better quality of life off the streets and away from the struggles, dangers and triggers inherent in that lifestyle. Jon’s commitment to improving his wellness despite all odds is evident in his story with us. Even when sleeping on a bench night after night in a high-density drug using environment, Jon found motivation within himself every day to attend Pathways.

First, Jon improved his wellness enough to receive a bed at the River St. Shelter. Jon simultaneously attended the Shelter and Pathways to Wellness programming in an effort to move towards his wellness goals of obtaining permanent housing, employment, and long-term recovery. Jon expressed interest in applying for a work training position at Community Connection to help further develop his employment skills. Jon took the initiative to develop his own resume and communicate to staff his commitment to vocational growth.

Jon fits the description of the “strong, silent type,” but put a scrabble or chessboard in front of him and he becomes animated and competitive in his good-natured way while flashing his rare, bright smile to everyone. Jon enriched the Pathway to Wellness program through his consistent participation, dependable commitment to his work training position and peers, and his willingness to be a team player. Jon established himself as a peer leader. His work ethic and compassionate heart naturally put him in a mentorship position to other Pathways participants. Jon successfully completed the three-month work training position with astounding results. It was with no surprise that he was offered a permanent job with Community Connection as a Program Assistant due to his diligence, work ethic, and commitment.

Jon no longer has to sleep in the park while battling incessant mental health and substance abuse challenges with little hope of recovery. Jon is now housed, employed, and experiencing long-term recovery. As a blazing role model for his peers, Jon demonstrates the transformative power that recovery can have on an individual despite their challenges. As a valued Community Connection employee, reliable community member, housed individual, and champion of recovery, Jon’s story is an example of the impact the Pathways to Wellness program had in our community. In Jon’s own words, “This program was my life. I felt really supported and grounded. I just want to give back now”.

Thank You & Call to Action

We stand ready to partner to share our learnings and advocate for re-investment in programs like Avenues. The pilot grant showed us that the Pathways to Wellness model works. The program significantly reduced the number of psychiatric hospital and jail visits, provided treatment resistant and high-risk individuals with a safe and therapeutic space to stabilize, and assisted participants in achieving meaningful treatment goals that enhanced long-term recovery. Now we need our community to fund it.

Steps you can take to help us reinstitute this program:

- Letter and statements to the Board of Supervisors, City Council meetings and other funders to invest in what works, including restoring or sustaining effective programs.
- Share our impacts and stories to raise awareness among Housing, Mental Health and Substance Use Advocates, providers and funders to inform policy and practice.
- Request a speaker for Pathways to talk with your community group about what works.