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Recovery Advocacy and Peer Recovery Support at the McShin Foundation: An Interview with John Shinholser

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Introduction

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, grassroots recovery community organizations (RCOs) began to dot the American landscape. They represented a new type of organization within the alcohol and drug problems arena, resembling neither addiction treatment organizations nor recovery mutual aid fellowships. Those RCOs, now organized within the Association of Recovery Community Organizations (ARCO), constituted the foundation of what became a new recovery advocacy movement in the United States. They also evolved into a new genre of peer-based recovery support services. The McShin Foundation, prominently featured in the film, *The Anonymous People*, is an RCO that has developed a national reputation for its innovative community outreach efforts, particularly within the criminal justice system. I recently (July 2015) had the opportunity to interview John Shinholser,

President of McShin Foundation, about his work in recovery advocacy and peer recovery support services. Please join us in this conversation.

Advocacy History

Bill White: John, could you describe your personal journey into recovery advocacy and peer recovery support?

John Shinholser: Bill, I've been in recovery and interested in recovery advocacy for a long time. In the late 1990s, Virginia got an RCSP [Recovery Community Support Program] grant from the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. Its purpose was to mobilize the recovery community to give them a voice in the areas of treatment and policy. About that same time, I became aware through Carol McDaid of the national recovery advocacy movement that was then picking up steam. Through those influences, I started going down to our General Assembly trying to help get funding for our local treatment agencies. That inspired me to do more and out of that came the decision to establish the McShin Foundation to

provide a more formal framework to do recovery advocacy and provide peer recovery support services. Your early monographs and the national meetings that Carol was attending provided us guidance on how to do this work. I had no idea what this stuff was called but I had been doing it for years. But we decided to organize and take it to another level through which we could heal a lot of families, save a lot of lives, and save a lot of tax dollars.

Bill White: When did the McShin Foundation formally begin its work?

John Shinholser: July, 2004; we're eleven years old now.

Bill White: Tell me how the programs at McShin have evolved over these years.

John Shinholser: We started out in a 56 square foot rented office. There was no money. I was still painting and wallpapering and Carol, my wife, allowed me to start this project knowing that she was going to have to pay most of the bills at the house until I created an income. The McShin Foundation quickly grew. My original intention was to find and link people to the treatment and recovery support resources that were available, but then I realized how few resources were available for most of the people we were trying to serve. So, within a short period of time, we moved into a larger space; rented some recovery residences; started helping people in early recovery get jobs, and then branched into a larger menu of recovery support services. Then we began taking this menu of services into the jails and prisons. And here we are eleven years later with a fifteen thousand square foot recovery center, a collective capacity of 55 in our recovery residences, and all kinds of outreach services. We are impacting three major correction institutions here in the Richmond metropolitan area—work that has brought national attention and an award from the National Association of Counties. Yesterday at our annual board retreat we

approved a \$950,000.00 one-year operating budget. We anticipate going over the million dollar a year revenue mark this year. For an authentic RCO founded with no start up grants or funding to penetrate so deeply in the very fabric of our substance use disorder delivery systems is our crowning achievement.

Recovery Support Services in the Criminal Justice System

Bill White: When I mentioned the McShin Foundation, people often refer to the jail and prison work that you are doing. Could you describe that work in more detail?

John Shinholser: Well, it's a no-brainer. Our jails and our prisons are filled with addicts, most of whom are not hard-core criminals. If you are compassionate as a community, you can reach and salvage many of these people. Drug courts are great, but not every area can afford to have a drug court. Drug courts cost money. So we set out to find a prosecutor and a judge and offered them a proposal. We said, "Look, let's start reaching addicted people entering the criminal justice system and refer these people to a recovery program." We opened up a satellite recovery center right across the street from the courthouse where these men and women can come. It mirrors a drug court with the exception that it's run by people in recovery rather than clinicians or people who are employed by the county. We're not probation/parole, we're not pre-trial, we're just recovering people like you and me that provide recovery support services in a recovery community center that are tailored and customized to the needs of this population. If people complete our core program and stay clean and sober for a year, then the judge and the commonwealth, in most cases, will reduce criminal charges from a felony to a misdemeanor where that is legally possible. In a lot of cases, they dismiss the charges when the person has done very well with their recovery. The

consumer pays for the costs associated with the program, which saves the taxpayers what would otherwise be jail costs. On average, our program is saving a community of 30,000 citizens over a quarter million dollars a year, with over 95% of our participants making that one-year benchmark of successful participation. The Caroline County recovery program we operate has four phases spanning one year of involvement, each phase of which has different participation requirements (See Appendix).

Bill White: And how many people are participating at any one time in that program, John?

John Shinholser: We have between 25 and 35 people at a time participating. There are many counties in Virginia that are now looking to do this because they can't all afford a drug court and what we are doing is simple to set up. Any judge and any prosecutor can set up this type of program in cooperation with a local recovery community organization. At McShin, we actually financed the entire operation until we scientifically demonstrate the savings. Then all the county's got to do is reimburse us 50 percent of the savings they would otherwise be paying for the costs of incarceration. Two years ago, we went to the Board of Supervisors and they agree to give us a \$30,000 reimbursement check. This year, they agreed to give us another \$30,000 reimbursement check and that supplements, in part, what the fees don't cover from the consumer. The consumer fee to be in the program is \$35 a week, but we serve a lot of people who are not able to pay all of that. McShin subsidizes it and then the County funding covers costs beyond what the participant fees can support. To go forward with other counties, we're asking them to compensate us 50 percent of the savings, which gives us enough money to run the program at a higher level of quality than we're currently running it at.

Bill White: The 50 percent is the 50 percent of what it would have cost to incarcerate those individuals?

John Shinholser: Yes. As example, one of our area counties has a daily rate of \$38 for the cost of each prisoner in jail. Every day one of our citizens is in a regional jail, the county is writing a \$38 a day check. So the minimal sentencing guidelines say you're going to do 30 days in jail, with a range from 30 days up to nine months. That's how we calculate the savings. Rather than paying the regional jail \$38 a day, we can run our program at half that cost to the counties. That's what we save the taxpayer on that individual. The Secretary of Public Safety realizes that a lot of people we serve would end up in the State Department of Corrections, which would cost the state taxpayers money. So, we're saving the localities money, and we have not even calculated the state savings by reducing the need for incarceration and reducing the high prison recidivism rate. We get some resistance from some whose interests are threatened by what we are doing, but some of the higher level politicians like what we're doing. The Governor likes it. The Public Safety Secretary likes it. The Attorney General likes it. But, unfortunately, local government is what rules on stuff like this, and that's where you must begin to set up a program like what we are doing. This is one of those future niche areas that the recovery community can do as a service to people in need of recovery and to the community. If you can find local partners in the court system, these types of programs will flourish and grow.

Bill White: John, do you staff this program using a mix of both paid staff and volunteers?

John Shinholser: We do. We have one main paid staffer who came through the McShin program and was trained as a recovery coach. He's a drug court program

graduate himself and is very skilled in working with the men and women who enter this program. And we also have a few people paid stipends and several volunteers. This is a simple program in its staffing and design, but it works.

Bill White: Tell me a little bit about the volunteers, their numbers, and how you you've recruited and trained them.

John Shinholser: Well, most of our volunteers are people who came through our programs or their family members. And the structure they work within is what you might call primitive. The difference between us and CCAR, Pro-Act, or other CSAT-funded programs is that they had sufficient funds to set up good management systems on the front end. Because we weren't funded in this way, we set up strictly on spiritual guidelines, so to speak. We grab people up and say, "Here, I got to run out for a while. You're going to answer the phone for the next couple hours." It's as much about creating a mutually supportive community as setting up a "program." That's how we attract our volunteers. We have a high level of compliance with the accreditation standards, yet we are able to maintain the authenticity of what we do and the simplicity of the recovery pathways we support.

Local Relationships

Bill White: And what's been your relationship with the local recovery fellowships?

John Shinholser: Early on, they thought we were selling AA or selling NA. Some suggested we were trying to get rich on sponsorship and that we were taking advantage of the Twelve-Step programs. They have warmed up over the years. Anybody with half a brain realizes that we are the number one feeder of newcomers to NA and AA in the Richmond area. It took a while for people to realize we're no threat to them. We're not trying to be or replace those

fellowships. So as time has passed, more and more people from the local fellowships are warming up to us. We also experienced similar resistance from local treatment centers.

Bill White: Talk a bit more about your relationship with the treatment centers and other agencies.

John Shinholser: Well, we have had some tension over us challenging programs for wanting to use medication without any other recovery supports or us challenging them for scheduling outpatients groups at times some of the best AA and NA meetings were being held. We refer people to treatment who need the clinical procedures and protocols that they offer, but we also try to emphasize the simplicity and the authenticity of involving oneself in a recovery community. I object when programs want us to refer people to them, but who never refer people back for participation in the recovery community—whether that be our services or the local recovery fellowships. At first, treatment organizations treated us like an unwanted red-headed step-child. I just don't tolerate that from anybody. Too many of our local agencies are strictly wired to produce government, tax-funded jobs; they're not wired to produce outcomes from the services that they provide. We have far more freedom to focus on recovery outcomes because that is all we are interested in. I've been trying to get everybody to play respectfully in the same sandbox with each other. Why don't we coordinate all of our efforts instead of being paranoid about each other?

Bill White: A lot of the tensions you describe seem to boil down to a competition over limited money.

John Shinholser: That is the source of much of the tension. Currently funded agencies are doing everything they can to protect their own funding by preventing recovery community organizations from receiving any state funding. I've fought for

years to get this Office of Recovery in Virginia, to get reimbursement for recovery support service, to establish recovery coaching as a legitimate, respected service, but the Department created a one-person recovery office with no power to do anything. They created their own recovery coach curriculum without even inviting us to the table to offer assistance, yet we were the first people here doing recovery coaching through our original RCSP grant in 2008. We were the first organization here to become a NAADAC CEU provider of recovery coaching, and yet the agency has not invited us to one development meeting on their own recovery coach model. They're blending recovery coaching and counseling roles in ways that blur the critical differences in these roles. They had a chance to get it right and blew it out of their own sense of self-importance and fear of working with an authentic recovery community organization.

State of Recovery Advocacy

Bill White: John, you have had an opportunity in recent years to visit other states and countries to get a sense of the state of the national movement. How do you see the state of recovery advocacy nationally right now?

John Shinholser: Well, we've come a long way and are more advanced than at any time in our history. We're in a good position with the work Greg Williams and others are doing around organizing the national march on the mall in DC. We have grown organizationally. Now if we can get YPR, the collegiate recovery programs, Faces and Voices, NCADD, Shatterproof, the Purple Project, and all the others groups to come together at one time, we will make enormous strides in the next five to ten years. But if we don't, if we continue to be splintered at the national level, it's going to end up like other movements that fractured into schisms. I think we can make great gains if everybody works together. Your hard work, a lot of other

people's hard work has paid off. We're now at that next level, and I'm trying to teach these YPR kids some of what we learned along the way. They are the future of this movement. We have to support and trust them.

Bill White: You mentioned Greg Williams, and I know you had a chance to work with Greg on the *Anonymous People* film. What was that experience like for you and your organization?

John Shinholser: You know, Bill, I think before Greg come around, we were already kicking ass and taking names. I was really secure in what we were doing. Greg showed up and just filmed us doing what we do. Now, clearly he did some masterful editing that made me look a lot smarter than I really am. When his film was released, it elevated us to a whole different level. All of a sudden, I was in a position to speak to people I wouldn't have normally spoken to and we became much more influential as an organization. Overall, working with Greg on the film was a marvelous experience—both in the filming process and all that has since unfolded from it.

Bill White: Were you surprised at how influential and how far-reaching the film was following its release?

John Shinholser: No, I always thought it was going to be the next Father Martin's *Chalk Talk*. It's going to be the go-to film well into the future, but the film means nothing if we don't keep the momentum going. We've got to keep hammering away if we are going to carry this movement into the future and fulfill its many goals.

Bill White: Based on your contacts with people from around the country, how do you currently see the overall state of peer recovery support services in the U.S.?

John Shinholser: Peer recovery support services are expanding, but you are getting very few McShin-like people popping up at

local levels. There are very few of us who are self-funded and who have risen with authentic roots in local recovery communities, but there are many more that will be rising and that is a really good thing. I see a lot of formal agencies that are tapping in to this new recovery focus and some of them are doing some pretty cool work, while other hard knucklehead agencies ain't getting in no matter what. They're going to go down fighting. They want to hold on to that typewriter; screw the laptop. The community-based models are coming from places like CCAR. Phil [Valentine] did a good job spreading the CCAR model of recovery coaching and recovery advocacy. I don't get out west to often see what White Bison has done, but I read a whole lot of cool things about them. And I am noticing that most single state treatment authorities are funding and training recovery support service providers. I'm amazed at how many copies of our recovery coach training manual have been downloaded from our website!

Reflections

Bill White: What have been the greatest challenges you have faced doing this work?

John Shinholser: Well, I have to reflect back to 1982. I got clean in the Marine Corps in Hawaii. Castle Medical Center had a ribbon-cutting for an alcohol treatment center in the hospital at the time, with Governor and later Senator Inouye doing the ribbon-cutting. We all gathered around, shook hands, ate cookies, and had our pictures taken. It was really cool. It seemed as a field we were really going places. Then when I got out of the Marine Corps, I got really busy getting back in in the community trying to make a living, have a wife, a child, and whatnot. I really didn't notice how the crack epidemic created a kneejerk reaction from policymakers that guys like me went underground to hide from the increased stigma attached to addiction. Any chance of moving the movement forward at that

moment in time was just shot to shit. I couldn't believe how things had changed when I got re-involved in the field back in the early 2000s. Then that book come out, *Slaying the Dragon*, and William Moyers started giving his talks, and, all of a sudden, everything registered. I feel like recovering people were taken advantage of by our system and our society and nobody stopped it. People let it happen and I was offended. The rising advocacy movement helped me wake up to what was happening and channeled my anger into doing something positive.

Bill White: How have you sustained yourself personally over the years in this work?

John Shinholser: Well, the truth is, having had a spiritual awakening, you carry the message and you keep carrying it. I keep talking to newcomers every day, carrying a message of hope of escape from the disease of addiction. I also want people to know they can both get well and be part of the bigger solution to this problem through advocacy or service work. Carrying the message is the work, but it is also what sustains me.

Bill White: As you look back to the day McShin opened, what do you feel best about in terms of what you have been able to achieve?

John Shinholser: I feel good about having helped create an authentic recovery support service system. We've got these kids that are going to just step right in and keep this movement going forward. I just feel good being a part of the early movement. This has been the best thing I ever done. I didn't really do it, though. It's been a God thing. At the time, I was often complaining but, looking back, I know now know what He had in mind.

Bill White: There are a lot of other people inspired to start organizations like McShin? Do you have any guidance you would offer them?

John Shinholser: Yeah, just do it! If it's meant to be, it's going to do well. I'm quoted in that *Anonymous People* film, "Let's go make some history!" And that's something I got from you. People wanting to do this work should tap the early sources: your work, Johnny Allem, William Moyers, and others. When I spoke at Drexel, people came up to me and said, "Oh, my God, John, you're awesome!" But, I'm just an extension of **Bill White**, William Moyers, Johnny Allem and many others who went before me. I've got this need to let people know I'm just a pipeline of information that was there before me. I would have never been inspired had you guys not got inspired and then inspired me. Now I'm trying to inspire these young kids. If everybody inspires everybody, then one day, there's going to be a lot of inspired people running around! Like you say, "Recovery's contagious." It sure is.

Bill White: John, thank you for taking this time to offer your reflections on all we have discussed.

John Shinholser: It's been my pleasure, Bill.

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Appendix: Stages of the Caroline County Recovery Program operated by the McShin Foundation

First stage of Recovery Process

1. For the first 90 days: you will be required to go to 90 mandatory NA/AA meetings approved through the Caroline county recovery community program within 90 days. That's at least one mandatory meeting a day.
2. There will be a curfew that you must follow. You will be required to be at your home by 10 p.m. every night for the first 90 days of this program. You will be randomly drug/alcohol tested.
3. You will be required to get at least a temporary sponsor through the NA/AA meetings that you will be attending within your first week. You will then be asked to get a permanent sponsor within your first 30 days of the program.
4. You must find and join a home group in the NA/AA meetings within 14 days of recovery.
5. You will be required to show up 30 minutes prior to the NA/AA meeting that you are attending that day. You will also be required to remain at the meeting spot 30 minutes after the meeting has ended.
6. You will be required to do step work with your sponsor on a regular basis.
7. You are required to participate in all meetings.
8. You may not exhibit old behaviors, nor see old people, places, and things.
9. You will be asked to make an appointment with your recovery coach at least once a week for an assessment for your recovery.

10. If you happen to relapse or have any slip-ups, you will be required to start the program all over from the beginning of step one.

ALL OF THESE REQUIREMENTS MUST BE MET BEFORE YOU MAY MOVE ON TO THE SECOND STAGE OF THIS RECOVERY PROGRAM.

Second stage of Recovery Process (The next 90 days)

1. You will have a new curfew that will be set to 11 p.m.
2. You will be required to volunteer for an area service sub-committee position or CCRCC alumni service position.
3. You will be required to go to 7 meetings within a week. Two may be faith meetings. You will be able to pick 4 meetings to attend where ever you may like to attend in your area.
4. You will still be required to give a specimen for a drug test weekly.
5. You will be responsible for your recovery and to keep contact with you recovery coach. You are required to call your recovery coach by 11 p.m. every night.
6. You will be required to help new peers that are coming into this program. “The therapeutic value of one alcoholic/addict helping another.”
7. You will still be required to make an appointment with your recovery coach once a week.
8. If you relapse or have any slip-ups, then you will be moved back to start the program over from step one, first stage.

ALL OF THESE REQUIREMENTS MUST BE MET BEFORE YOU ARE ABLE TO MOVE TO THE THIRD STAGE OF THIS RECOVERY PROGRAM.

Stage Three of the Recovery Program (The third 90-day segment)

1. Your curfew will remain 11 p.m. Sunday through Thursday. However, you will be allowed on Fridays and Saturdays to stay out until 12 a.m.
2. You will only be required to go to 5 meetings a week. You will be allowed to pick 4 meetings out of the 5 to go to whichever meeting you choose. Will still be required to have the chairman of that meeting sign your attendance slips.
3. You will be required to actively work your steps with your sponsor.
4. You will still be required to help the new peers with the therapeutic value factor of one alcoholic/addict helping another.
5. You will also still be required to call your recovery coach Sunday through Thursday by 11 p.m. to check in and call by 12 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays.
6. By now you should not have any slip-up, if you do, you may be required to go back and start at stage one again.

You will be randomly drug/alcohol tested.

ALL OF THESE REQUIREMENTS MUST BE MET TO CONTINUE TO THE FOURTH AND FINAL STAGE OF THIS RECOVERY PROGRAM.

Stage Four of the Recovery Program (Final 90 days of the Program)

1. Curfews will remain the same or may be changed, depending on your recovery coach and based on your personal recovery.
2. You will be required to go to 4 mandatory meetings a week of your choice, with the chairman of those meetings' signature on your attendance sheet. You must also attend at least one meeting a week at CCRCC.
3. You will still be required to meet with your recovery coach once a week. This is still your responsibility.
4. The therapeutic value of helping each other is still required as are you to help your peers.
5. Fourth stage peers will share their experience, strength, and hope with the first stage peers to guide them through their process of recovery.
6. If you have any slip-ups you may be required to go back to stage one and start this process all over.

ALL OF THESE REQUIREMENTS MUST BE MET FOR YOU TO GRADUATE THIS PROGRAM.