

Breaking Down Barriers

Individuals with Mental Illness Move Forward with LSC's Help

John* wanted what a lot of adults want – a place to call his own. But for John, who suffers from a severe and persistent mental illness, this was a challenging goal to accomplish. Helping John and others who are diagnosed with a mental illness work toward their goals is just one of the initiatives of ACTT, a program of Lutheran Services Carolinas. ACTT stands for Assertive Community Treatment Team, and it is an innovative approach that reaches out to severe and persistent mentally-ill adults who have not had success with traditional treatment programs.

“ACTT is a psychiatric hospital without walls,” said Amelia Howard, a licensed clinical social worker and addiction specialist who serves as ACTT’s director. “Our team takes the treatment to our clients at their homes, places of employment, community centers, or wherever they are. We are breaking down barriers for our clients and enhancing their quality of life.” Currently LSC’s ACTT services are only offered to clients in Orange, Person, and Chatham Counties, but program expansion could happen in the future.

No “I” in Team

ACTT is truly a multi-disciplinary effort. In addition to a program director, the staff includes a psychiatrist, psychiatric nurses, a substance abuse counselor, a vocational specialist, a clinical counselor, a peer support specialist, an office manager, and an intern from the UNC School of Social Work. Team meetings are held every morning with staff members giving updates and discussing treatment plans. The team takes a shared caseload approach; the whole team is responsible for all of the clients.

“Team members can see four to six clients a day,” said Howard. “We work with them on whatever they need – from helping them choose nutritious items at the grocery store or filling out a job application to managing their medications or reconnecting with loved ones. We want our clients to be successful and healthy in all facets of life.”

Individuals with severe and persistent mental illness, which includes schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, are no strangers to hospitalization. They are often referred to the ACTT program due to multiple visits to the hospital and lack of success with outpatient therapies and counseling. “ACTT is an evidence-based practice that succeeds where other treatments have failed,” said Dr. Arlene Miller, ACTT’s psychiatrist. “When our clients are in a hospital setting, they typically respond well to treatment, then when they are discharged, they miss the structured programming and support. This is where ACTT picks up and is able to start building relationships and helping them gain more insight into their illness.”

Positive Outcomes

There are many advantages to ACTT including reduced symptoms and hospitalizations; reduced frequency of crisis events; decreased family stress; reduced

involvement with the criminal justice system; improved functioning in social or work settings; improved stability and quality of housing; and increased quality of life.

“Clients who receive services from ACTT see a significant reduction in the amount of visits to the hospital and days spent in the hospital,” said Howard. “In addition to all of the advantages, the most important thing is that we are meeting the clients’ basic needs and helping them get through each day.” Dr. Miller agrees, “On a practical level, we are seeing adults with severe disabilities get the care they need and deserve.”

And, while there are many success stories to come out of the ACTT program, Howard is still in awe of how things came together for John. “All I can say is it was truly a miracle,” she said. John was living in an assisted living facility but was ready to live independently. A rare opportunity came in the form of an available apartment in a community that actively supports individuals with disabilities. According to Howard, within a week, John applied to live in the apartment and was approved. Due to his current living situation, John didn’t have enough money saved for a security deposit for his new apartment. On his behalf, Howard and the ACT Team requested money for a security deposit from the We Believe Fund, an LSC employee-funded giving program that grants funds to LSC clients and residents on a case by case basis.

“Everything just happened so fast,” Howard said. “This would not have been possible without so many people at LSC coming together on our client’s behalf – we received money for a security deposit and an entire apartment’s worth of furniture from Refugee Services.” In November 2013, John moved into his new apartment and is really doing well.

“The ACT Team helps keep me focused and gives me a sense of direction,” said John. “If I’m moving forward, then I am not moving backward.” John said having a place to call his own has made a difference in his life. “It has opened a lot of doors for me. It’s kind of a nice accomplishment to have my own apartment.”

**Name has been changed*

Story by Kristen Kitchen, Director of Donor Relations