

PALS: LENDING A HAND TO PEOPLE WHO USE SUBSTANCES TRANSITIONING OUT OF CENTRAL NOVA SCOTIA (CANADA) CORRECTIONAL FACILITY

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Background: In Nova Scotia we have approximately 300 new hepatitis C (HCV) diagnoses primarily related to substance use annually. The Peers Assisting and Lending Support (PALS) Project has identified a huge disconnect for HCV-positive people who use substances (PWUS) transitioning from provincial correctional institutions into the community. PALS is aimed at closing this gap through a peer outreach program for PWUS being released from Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility (CNSCF).

Description of model of care/intervention : Current or former PWUS are being referred to PALS prior to or on release from the institution. We are providing clean using supplies, naloxone training, safer sex items and basic hygiene products, along with peer support and education. Many PALS members have experience with incarceration and/or HCV and can help link PWUS to HCV testing and care with the goal of treating/curing existing infections to prevent disease progression and new transmissions.

Effectiveness: The 27-month project began in January 2019 with the training of peers on overdose awareness and naloxone, harm reduction, confidentiality, stigma/language and boundaries. The objective is to reduce HCV-related risk behaviours among 75-100 PWUS being released from CNSCF, resulting in fewer overdose fatalities and less transmission of blood borne infections such as HIV and HCV.

Conclusion and next steps: CNSCF staff and PWUS have been receptive to the PALS program. The project is building upon PALS members' strengths, experience and knowledge and empowering them through paid positions to deliver harm reduction/health promotion services to their peers upon release. While this program is in its infancy, preliminary feedback indicates the benefits of supporting PWUS the minute they are released from CNSCF and thereafter as needed to bridge the gap in the transition from incarceration to community. Qualitative and quantitative data will be collected to evaluate the success of this initiative in meeting its objectives.