



PROJECT HEAL

A community partnership
to Help, Empower and Lead



LATEST NEWS, UPDATES, & STORIES



While growing up in Haiti, Peterson, an active Project HEAL client, recalls watching American films and imagining what life would be like in the States. “I remember thinking how great life looked in the movies,” he said. “Coming here and moving into the environment I did, I realized it wasn't like how I thought it was going to be.”

For Peterson, life in Haiti was difficult. Government corruption, food shortages, inequality and violence left a lasting impression on him. “I saw a lot of people dying,” he recalled. “Even the wild dogs were violent, we had to run away from them on a daily basis.” These conditions forced Peterson's mother to immigrate to America with the hope of establishing herself and sending for her family later. However, this left Peterson and his sisters in the care of his father, who was abusive. Peterson describes being beaten so badly by his father that he could barely walk afterwards. These experiences would be the first of many that would lay the groundwork for Peterson's journey.

At thirteen years old, Peterson and his family were finally able to move to America and live with his mother, who was residing in a lower income section of Queens, New York. His introduction to America was one of violence and racism within the black community in Queens, who were distrusting of Haitian immigrants. “We basically had to band together in the Haitian community to survive,” said Peterson. “So many people would have a problem with us because we were Haitian, they would wait outside for us at school. Some had gang affiliations and guns.” After living in Queens for almost four years and avoiding any serious injury, Peterson and his family moved to Asbury Park, New Jersey when he was seventeen.

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Moving as a teenager is a big adjustment for anyone. Thankfully, Peterson quickly established a core group of friends when moving to Asbury Park. He was able to avoid trouble at first but it was not long before he was swept up in the community violence that plagued Asbury Park at the time. It was a familiar story for Peterson, having to band together with friends in order to avoid being violently assaulted in the community. Unfortunately, his luck would eventually run out. One evening, Peterson was viciously attacked by multiple individuals, knocked unconscious and hospitalized for a period of time. “Something just snapped after that, I wasn't the same,” he said. “I was just sick of being abused from every angle, seeing my friends get shot. I was angry after that and wanted to hurt the world like it hurt me.” These events set Peterson on a path where he would eventually succumb to his environment, reacting in the only way he thought he could protect himself...by picking up a gun.

After receiving his first gun charge at eighteen years old, Peterson spent the next twenty years doing whatever he could to make money on the street. He cycled in and out of prison multiple times, always falling back into the same pattern. “You come out of jail and it's really hard, your mind is different, you feel like a loser. You have nobody to help you do anything. You just forget about everything and go back to the same pattern because it's easy,” said Peterson. He goes on to stress that doing the wrong thing is easy, it's making a change that is the hard part. After being charged with distribution in 2016, Peterson served five years in prison. Upon his release, he vowed things would be different.

Peterson was tired of being angry and wanted to make a change, especially after the recent birth of his son. He fully immersed himself in the New Jersey Reentry Corporation (NJRC), a non-profit agency with a social mission to remove all barriers to employment for citizens returning from jail or prison. Through NJRC, Peterson was referred to Project HEAL for trauma-informed, wraparound services and support. “From the door, the moment I came in, it was very welcoming. Tracy, the secretary, made me feel at ease. It felt like a family atmosphere here,” said Peterson. “The questions I came in with, the answers I wanted; I found out I had them all along. I just needed help finding them on my own.” Peterson has been involved with Project HEAL for the last six months and expressed this has been the first time he really addressed past traumas.

At Project HEAL, Peterson engaged in trauma-informed individual therapy to address symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder related to his long history of trauma. Peterson also identified a few case management needs that were resolved with Project HEAL's assistance i.e. obtaining a driver's license, enrolling in a Nonprofit Management program at Brookdale Community College, and advocating for visitation rights with his son.

Today, Peterson is focused on keeping his head in the books and out of trouble. He dreams of starting his own non-profit organization to help kids who struggled like he once did. He believes his calling to help others is not too far out of reach. “I'm 39 years old and I'm in school because of Project HEAL,” said Peterson. “I never thought I'd be in school. I feel like I'm doing something with my life, working towards my goals.”



NEW GRANT SEES PROJECT HEAL REACH FURTHER INTO COMMUNITY



Project HEAL was awarded \$500,000 to expand services to Monmouth County's at-risk youth, ages 13-20, and provide them with the holistic support needed to break the cycle of violence.

“As we celebrate our 1 year anniversary, Project HEAL will build even greater connections with local school districts and faith-based organizations to deploy Peer Specialists, who are local, young adults, impacted by violence, who can act as role models and help lead kids down a positive, safe and fulfilling path,” said Lisa McDermott, Project HEAL's Clinical Program Manager.

This award is part of \$8.2 million in new funding for community-based violence intervention programs Governor Phil Murphy announced in February, the largest such investment in New Jersey history. Originally, Project HEAL was funded in part by a \$20 million dollar federal grant in 2020, which was the largest such investment in the United States to address recurring instances of community violence. Project HEAL was awarded this new grant, along with 25 other recipients across the state, to continue this vital work and reach further out in the community. This would not have been possible without the hard work of the Project HEAL team and all those who have supported the program. For this, Project HEAL thanks you and will continue to do everything in its power to serve the people of the community and connect them with the help and resources they need.

PROJECT HEAL SPEARHEADS EVENT IN SPRINGWOOD PARK

Project HEAL will host a community event on Friday, April 29th in Springwood Ave Park to highlight National Crime Victims' Rights Week (April 24th-April 30th). Since 1981, The Federal Department of Justice has led National Crime Victims' Rights Week and has challenged the Nation to confront and remove barriers to achieving justice for all victims of crime. During NCVRW, we celebrate the accomplishments of the victims' rights movement and reflect on how far we have come.

Project HEAL partnered with the Office of the Monmouth County Prosecutor, WeBuildNJ, the Asbury Park Kiwanis Club, the Asbury Park Public Library and the City of Asbury Park to hold a resource-centered event that will connect community members with resources to aid them in their struggles with victimization. In 2020, statistics provided by The Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office and the Victims of Crime Compensation office found that only 5% of reported victimizations received compensation from the Victims of Crime Compensation Office.

RIGHTS, ACCESS, EQUITY,
For All Victims

Help Crime Survivors Find Their Justice

Victim Services Information Fair

"We want to turn victims into survivors - and survivors into thrivers." - Tarana Burke

Friday, April 29th, 5:30 PM
Springwood Ave Park, Asbury Park, NJ

- Delicious Local Food
- Community Resources
- Medical Screenings
- Music & Fun
- Free Raffles & Giveaways
- Healthy Living Activities

Join us for a candlelight vigil to honor those we have lost to violent crime....

This is usually because victims are not aware of their rights and do not know there are resources to help them. Project HEAL and its partners felt creating an event to promote awareness and provide information and resources was essential. The event will feature community agencies with information and resources, healthy living activities, local food vendors, trauma-informed health screenings and keynote speakers. The event will end with a candlelit vigil to honor those we lost to violence. All are encouraged to attend!

MEET THE STAFF: PROJECT HEAL PROGRAM MANAGER, LISA MCDERMOTT

Like many in this line of work, a call to help others can often be traced back to an early age. “As a young person, I found that peers would turn to me and share information that they didn’t share with others,” said Lisa McDermott, Clinical Program Manager for Project HEAL. “I vividly remember thinking to myself, ‘I just want to help in whatever way I can.’” McDermott grew up in Hawthorne, a small suburban town in northern New Jersey.

After graduating high school, McDermott attended Arizona State University. It was here that she found herself in a domestic violence relationship she could not get out of. “I tried to tap into some resources but always found myself back at square one,” McDermott said. After a few years and with the support of those around her, she decided to move back home and attend William Paterson University.

It was there that she met a professor who just received grant funding to start a violence prevention program on campus. “It was the universe sending me a sign, a sign of hope and healing, and encouraging me to move forward with my life.” McDermott helped launch this program at William Paterson University and eventually became the Campus Victim Services Coordinator, receiving referrals from students and staff and providing resources for those impacted by intimate partner violence.

McDermott went on to earn a Masters of Social Work degree from Rutgers University. She became a dually-licensed Clinical Social Worker and Clinical Alcohol and Drug Counselor and worked in the field for over 10 years in various treatment settings. In early 2020, McDermott was contacted by her colleague with whom she built the campus violence prevention program with. She was informed about a potential opportunity to build another program, this time, serving victims of violent crime in Monmouth County. “Once again, here was the universe sending me a sign. It was a risk and a leap of faith but I knew this was my calling. I came full circle,” said McDermott.

McDermott was hired as Clinical Program Manager for Project HEAL in August 2020, and in coordination with Found Medical Director, Dr. Shah, built the program brick by brick. Starting a new program during a pandemic, finding the right team, building relationships, creating policy and procedures, finding office space; “It takes a long time to develop a program and lay the foundation to be successful,” McDermott said. “We had the right support, the right environment and the right team in place to get where we are today.” McDermott hopes to see Project HEAL expand its services across the entire health network of Hackensack, and with continued hard work and dedication, believes the program can get there.