



PROJECT HEAL

A community partnership
to Help, Empower and Lead



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To understand where we are, is to understand where we have been. For Aaron, a lifelong resident of Asbury Park, he recalls the allure of the streets and the money drug dealers made on the corner. “Life in Asbury growing up was tough,” recalls Aaron. “I got into drug dealing by seeing it, the money made- everybody wanted to be a drug dealer.” Aaron tried his best to avoid trouble but before long, was swept up in the streets after experiencing a traumatic loss.

Aaron was born into a stable home with two parents and four siblings. In 1998, when he was 14 years old, Aaron’s mother died. He recalls finding her at home and calling 911, a memory that weighs heavily on him. “It was tough, I don’t share that with many people,” says Aaron. While trying to process their grief, Aaron’s family experienced more loss when his father, who was previously incarcerated, missed a parole check in while he was making his mother’s funeral arrangements. “After that, my dad got locked up and I was thrown into foster care,” Aaron recalls. “Some of my siblings went with family, but I was kind of left on my own.”

Aaron became more susceptible to the streets than ever before. Efforts were made to enroll him within various treatment facilities and programs in hopes to reverse his growing behavioral issues. Before long, he dropped out of high school, was actively selling drugs, stealing cars, and hanging with cliques around the neighborhood.



It was not long before Aaron would serve two and a years in prison for possession of a firearm, his first of multiple prison sentences. Upon release, he found a job working for a local moving company but continued to sell drugs on the side to make extra money. Aaron was able to steer clear of trouble until 2010, when he went to jail for 7 months for drug possession.

After his release, Aaron was stable, working odd jobs here and there. But his life was once again shaken by two horrific events in 2022. First, Aaron stepped on a rusty nail outside his home. What seemed like a simple injury to treat quickly spiraled out of control as the wound became severely infected.

Two of Aaron's toes had to be amputated. Then he was faced with a very difficult decision- to keep removing pieces of his foot as the infection grew worse or to amputate the lower part of his leg completely. He opted for the latter.. Out of work and having to relearn how to walk, Aaron spent the summer trying to put the pieces of his life back together. Last September, while hanging out with some friends outside a residence on Asbury Ave and Ridge, a car pulled up. "Some guy rolled up looking like he was about to say something, then aimed a gun out the window," says Aaron. "Me and all of my boys got shot. My buddy got shot in the leg and shoulder and my other buddy got shot in the back. I got shot in the leg and part of my prosthetic." He went on to explain how a friend of his was murdered by gunfire just down the road a month prior. Aaron and his friends were rushed to Jersey Shore University Medical Center, a Level I Adult & Level II Pediatric Trauma Center as verified by the American College of Surgeons' Committee on Trauma, where they all were treated and stabilized. It was here that Aaron met Project HEAL's Case Management Supervisor, Randy Scales.

Project HEAL has the unique ability to meet individuals at their hospital bedside immediately after violent injury. Randy connected with Aaron right after he was shot to provide immediate support, safety planning and told him about Project HEAL's outpatient services. Luckily, he agreed to give it a try. "I came here angry and just didn't know where to put it," said Aaron. "I'm growing with Project HEAL. If I could come more times a week, I would!" After his intake, Aaron started weekly trauma-informed individual therapy, received financial assistance for food and toiletries, and received support and advocacy in navigating his housing needs. Randy also advocated for Aaron after his prosthesis was confiscated and held for weeks as evidence in the shooting investigation. After much effort, Randy was able to return the prosthesis to Aaron, who was in desperate need of its return for his ongoing rehabilitation. When asked about this, Aaron replied with a smile "Randy is a good dude."



While the focus on Aaron's time with Project HEAL is to address the trauma which comes with a violent injury, his mind is still focused on helping others in the community. "It's a goal to get involved in this work, the work that matters giving back to my community," he said. "I want to push positive into people that need it, instead of negative." Project HEAL hopes to expand its volunteer services in 2023 to include clients like Aaron, who have grown with the program, have a deep connection to the community, and a desire to end the cycle of violence.

A MAN'S BEST FRIEND

By Kristen Ryan, LAC
Project HEAL Clinical Therapist



During his first visit to Project HEAL, Gregg was suffering from crippling anxiety. He was coming in 100 pounds overweight and dealing with unresolved trauma. As Gregg reflects on the pressures of growing up, he recalls a personality trait he's been forced to overcome. "I'm my own worst critic and it's been really hard. The exceptionalism in my family, the expectations of success. Kristen has been teaching me to be kinder to myself," Gregg said.

Trauma-informed therapy recognizes and emphasizes an individual's traumatic experiences and its impact on their behavior, mental health, and ability to engage in treatment. Clinical Therapists at Project HEAL approach each client and each session through a trauma-informed lens. The first thing I learned about Gregg was that he could not go anywhere without his service dog, Cali. Secondly, I learned that Gregg had unresolved childhood trauma which contributed to recent negative life events and setbacks that he felt were unmanageable. Project HEAL clients have often reported some type of abuse in their youth, whether physical, neglect, or sexual abuse. The HAVI White paper explains that "results from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study revealed that traumatic experiences early in life significantly increase the risk of engaging in violent behavior and/or violent victimization, as well as a range of other harmful behaviors and adverse health outcomes".

After gaining a full understanding of what Gregg had been struggling with, we began the real work. This consisted of processing the trauma of his past and identifying how it still impacts him today. Psychoeducation played a big role in Gregg's treatment. He can now understand the impact that trauma has on the brain and how to normalize his experiences. We worked toward building healthy coping mechanisms for his trauma-related symptoms by introducing and practicing stress-reduction and grounding techniques. Gregg continued this work outside of sessions by completing homework assignments geared toward implementing these coping skills intentionally throughout the week. Finally, we addressed self-acceptance, as this is something which is often negatively impacted by emotional abuse like Gregg experienced.

"Before coming to Project HEAL, I couldn't leave the house without my support dog," he said. "Now I've been able to go to the store by myself, make healthy lifestyle changes, and even get my photography business up and running!" Gregg was recently featured in a local news article, where he credits Project HEAL for helping immensely in his recovery journey. Gregg is well on his way to implementing the tools he developed while working with Project HEAL, and is ready to move onto the next chapter of life.

NJ HVIPS AWARDED MORE FUNDING TO CONTINUE LIFE SAVING WORK



In January 2023, Governor Phil Murphy and Attorney General Matthew J. Platkin announced that Project HEAL, and 10 other HVIPs statewide, were awarded funds from the federal American Rescue Plan Act to continue support for HVIPs throughout the state. “Keeping New Jerseyans safe is my number one priority, and these groundbreaking violence intervention programs stop cycles of violence before they start,” said Attorney General Platkin, in a press release. “These innovative community-based partnerships with our leading medical institutions across the state are what happens when we treat public safety as a shared responsibility and as a matter of public health.”

Further demonstrating the Murphy Administration’s commitment to this work, in September, the Attorney General’s office announced the launch of the Division of Violence Intervention and Victim Assistance (VIVA), a new subdivision within the Office of the Attorney General, specifically designed to coordinate with violence intervention programs in New Jersey. “Continued support of HVIP’s multi-disciplinary approach to disrupting cycles of community violence is aligned with VIVA’s trauma-informed, survivor-centered commitment to building safer, more resilient communities all throughout the state,” said Patricia Teffenhart, VIVA’s Executive Director, in a press release. Project HEAL sends heartfelt thanks to Governor Murphy, Attorney General Platkin and all those involved in continuing to support this work ; not just for Project HEAL but for all of our fellow HVIPs in New Jersey.

PROJECT HEAL CELEBRATES ITS SECOND ANNIVERSARY



In March 2023, Project HEAL officially celebrated its 2nd anniversary. In two short years, the program has served over 400 individuals impacted by violence, provided more than 1,850 trauma-informed counseling sessions and hospital bedside visits, and provided a variety of additional services including emergency financial assistance, health screenings, case management and referrals. “We’ve had the incredible privilege to join so many in their recovery journey over the last two years,” said Lisa McDermott, Project HEAL’s Clinical Program Manager. “Our numbers are higher than our initial goals. That shows how necessary these types of support and services are.”

To date, Project HEAL is approaching a milestone of having received a total of \$8 million in state and federal funding since its launch. The team feels the awarding of these grants is a reflection of the work that has been done the past two years, as well as acknowledgment from state and federal agencies that violence is a public health issue. The program has come a long way in two years from its original inception, which saw it become part of the largest investment in violence intervention programs in the United States at that time. “In two short years, it’s become clear to me that hospitals can and do break cycles of violence. Stories like Aaron’s and the numbers highlighted in this report underscore how we are doing exactly that at Project HEAL,” says Dr. Aakash Shah, Medical Director of Project HEAL. “And I believe it is just the start.”

With multiple new grant opportunities, community partnerships, and developing programming such as Elevate, Project HEAL looks forward to continuing their important work and expansion further into the community, to make sure vital services are being provided to those in need.

MEET THE TEAM
KRISTINA VANDER, LCSW
CLINICAL SUPERVISOR



Many on the Project HEAL team can trace their calling to help others back to an early age. For Clinical Supervisor Kristina Vander, LCSW, losing a family friend at the hands of mental illness left a deep wound, a wound she did not want anybody else to have to experience. “I remember feeling a lot of guilt because I was the last person to speak to her on the phone. I was 9 years old,” said Kristina. “I got into the work because I didn't want to feel how I felt growing up with that trauma and I didn't want anyone to feel how she felt before she took her life.” The significance of this traumatic event left an impact on Kristina and her family, one that is still felt to this day.

After graduating high school, Kristina attended Ramapo College where she received her undergraduate degree in social work. Before pursuing a masters degree, she took an internship at a Head Start program in northern New Jersey. It's here that she had another significant moment that would prove to be affirming to the path she chose. “I remember getting in my car sobbing after leaving work one day. I sent an email to my professor at the time saying I couldn't do this work,” Kristina recalls. “He responded by saying that because I had such a human, emotional reaction, that I am perfect for this work.” Kristina would go on to obtain a Masters Degree in Social Work from Rutgers University with a focus in trauma studies. She later went on to become a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Certified Sex Offender Treatment Provider. Her most recent experience was as a clinician at Trinitas Regional Medical Center's Department of Behavioral Health and Psychiatry with individuals who were recently released from federal prison.

After two years with Project HEAL, Kristina could not be more proud of what has been accomplished in such a short period of time. Many programs fail to get off the ground with such momentum and she believes it could mean great things for Project HEAL moving forward. “I would like to see programs like Project HEAL across the entire state and also the country. Hopefully we can be an example and help train other sites to expand their trauma-informed lens.”