



NEWS RELEASE

Media contact: Allison Inman
Senior Director, Office of Communications
allison.inman@vayahealth.com
828-225-2785, ext. 5364

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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‘Aftercare on the Outside’: Partnership helps formerly incarcerated people improve mental health

ASHEVILLE, N.C. – Vaya Health and the N.C. Department of Public Safety (DPS) are working together to help formerly incarcerated individuals in western North Carolina to get the behavioral health services they need to rebuild their lives upon release from prison.

Studies show that people in the criminal justice system nationwide experience significantly higher rates of both mental health and substance use disorders than the general public. Upon release from prison, when individuals also face obstacles to finding work, housing and transportation, these behavioral health challenges can increase recidivism, increase emergency department use and cause health and safety concerns.

Vaya manages behavioral health and intellectual/developmental disability services for people who receive Medicaid or are uninsured in western North Carolina, including individuals recently released from prison who are returning to one of the 22 counties Vaya serves. Vaya reached out to DPS in August after finding the majority of recent releasees were not attending their initial, critical behavioral health appointments. On average, only 22% attended the appointments during the three-month period from July to September.

Working together, Vaya and DPS more than doubled that to 48% during the following three months. During that time, 28 of 58 individuals in Vaya’s region attended their appointments, said Vaya Chief Population Health Officer Rhonda Cox.

“Mental health and recovery from substance use disorders are essential in helping people successfully transition to life outside prison,” Cox said. “These individuals are our neighbors, family, coworkers and community members, and it’s in everyone’s best interest that they receive the help they need to build stronger communities for all of us. We expect this collaboration will continue to increase the percentage of releasees who receive treatment.”

“High rates of serious mental illness and severe substance use disorders among people under supervision is a significant challenge for our probation and parole officers (PPOs),” said Sonya Brown, DPS social work program administrator. “This partnership with Vaya Health has enhanced our officers’ ability to access behavioral health services on behalf of the people they supervise and has provided support to the officer, as well as the individual in need of services. Readily accessible services and recovery supports protect people and public safety.”

The collaboration includes troubleshooting systemic problems, enhancing information-sharing and making probation officers key partners in helping releasees get to appointments. For example, prison social workers identify people who may need mental health or substance use treatment upon release. DPS helps Vaya connect with PPOs to share appointment information, and Vaya schedules initial appointments in a timeframe that allows PPOs more time to get involved.

Vaya is now working with select PPOs on issues such as how housing, transportation and employment affect an individual's overall wellbeing and chances for a continued successful transition to the local community.

About Vaya Health

Based in Asheville, N.C., Vaya Health manages public funds for mental health, substance use disorder and intellectual or developmental disability services in 22 western North Carolina counties: Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Caldwell, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Macon, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Swain, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes and Yancey. Access to care and crisis assistance are available 24/7 at 1-800-849-6127. Learn more at www.vayahealth.com.

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