

In 2019, Pennsylvania's York County Community Needs Assessment revealed a community in crisis. Over half of the area's population experienced depressive symptoms within a two-week period, yet residents struggled to get needed care. 21% of respondents didn't know where to find a mental health provider and another 29% found the cost to be a barrier. Coupled with a provider shortage that led to a six-or-more month treatment wait, the community's complex behavioral needs often intersected with justice system involvement.

In 2020, South Central Pennsylvania-based WellSpan Health launched the Specialized Treatment and Recovery Team (START), a Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC) which was largely supported by a grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The program provides integrated care for individuals considered too complex for conventional outpatient treatment or require immediate access to care to avoid a higher level of care.

### **Key success factor: Flexible, urgent care**

The guiding principle of START is a team-based approach that focuses on the aspects of care that the program participant considers to be the most important. A common challenge in traditional care is that it is assumed that the treatment team "knows what's best," even though the treatment team may not be addressing what a participant views as a priority need at that time. Additionally, there is a tremendous focus on inclusivity, ensuring that no one is turned away for being "in the wrong place." Notably, the program is focused on providing access and stabilization, rather than long-term care.

Leaders also analyze data to pinpoint the core issues impeding patient recovery and clinicians collaborate in real time to provide same- and next-



Staff at the WellSpan Philhaven START Clinic in York, Penn.

day psychiatric treatment in accessible locations.

START, which treats patients ages 12 and up, offers low-barrier and expedited access to psychiatric care, therapy, medication-assisted treatment, peer support and crisis intervention. The program also offers co-located primary care and pharmacy services, which simplifies care by reducing transportation needs and ensuring interconnected support.

Understanding that recovery is a complex and often non-linear journey, START has strategically developed policies that emphasize flexibility and responsiveness. By reserving slots in clinicians' schedules and/or having crisis team members on site for same-day assessments, the program guarantees immediate access to those in urgent need of behavioral health care, recognizing that timely intervention can be crucial for those grappling with urgent behavioral health challenges.

### **Key success factor: Intentional program design**

START leaders designed their care environment with the needs of their patients in mind, focusing on a calming environment without bright colors or clutter and featuring beautiful artwork. The design includes

shared office spaces to encourage collaboration and teamwork among team members. During the development, rather than retraining staff from an existing WellSpan program, leaders hired new team members to fit their specific values and goals such as diversity, harm reduction and trauma-informed care.

## Key success factor: Community bridges

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In 2020, York City data showed a concerning link between substance use disorder (SUD), the justice system, and homelessness. For example, 32% of those who experienced an overdose were under probation supervision, an additional 28% had previous probation supervision and just over half had been incarcerated at least once.

Recognizing that the challenge of integrated care required a collective response, WellSpan Health leveraged an existing network that emphasized

recovery, wellness and trauma-informed care. Leaders collaborated with the area's local Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), York County Human Services, Probation and Drug and Alcohol services, local shelters, and other community groups representing underserved populations, such as the Rainbow Rose Center for the LGBTQ+ community, to shape the START program.

START's office is also co-located with the WellSpan Community Health Center, Community Action for Recovery and Diversion (CARD), and the York County Mental Health Court Probation and Human Services staff. This allows for same-day referrals for particularly vulnerable clients, such as reentrants or those with severe and/or persistent mental illness. WellSpan Health also works with York County's Prison Reentry Program, which connects participants to primary care, bridges communication gaps between providers and connects individuals with long-term care services when needed. WellSpan Health's Special Programs Department also secures a smooth transition to behavioral health appointments upon release, even to external organizations, along with immediate

housing options and benefits such as food-purchasing assistance for low- and no-income people to help them maintain adequate nutrition and health.

START's team is composed of 25 staff, which include licensed therapists, psychiatrists, addiction medicine physicians, nurse practitioners, program nurses, certified recovery support, certified peer support, social workers and support team members. START employs peers who have lived experiences with mental health, SUD and incarceration to help aid participants in the recovery process, focusing on self-management and empowering individuals to live well with chronic conditions.

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## Financial foundations

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The START program, founded in April 2020, initially received a \$4 million grant for two years from SAMHSA. In October 2022, SAMHSA awarded an additional \$4 million grant to be used

over four years to expand and enhance the program's services, including extending walk-in hours, community outreach, on-site counseling and specialized care for marginalized groups. The WellSpan York Health Foundation contributed \$300,000 for necessary facility renovations, allowing the program to operate in a convenient location in downtown York with easy accessibility. While grant funding is essential to the program's structure, it also receives operational support from WellSpan Health and reimbursement through public and private insurances.

## Financial and health system impact

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- Monetary savings: START has identified over 4,500 instances where an individual was diverted from the emergency room. As such, WellSpan Health projected to have reduced costs of care by over \$10 million. This wasn't just a reduction in numbers but a redirection of resources to where they were most needed.
- Boosting access: Leaders reduced traditional outpatient wait time for behavioral health

services by 93%, ensuring that patients would no longer have to wait for months for psychiatric help and could receive immediate support.

- Strengthened partnerships: START's participation in the Joint Community Advisory Board and initiatives like the Reentry Opportunity Center opened doors to community engagement, empowering the community to take an active role in shaping its health. For example, START's provision of medication and treatment has transformed the way a local homeless shelter cares for its residents. By providing access to medication and treatment, START ensured that residents could manage and stabilize behavioral conditions, maintaining their shelter eligibility. In this way, medical interventions create a pathway for more stable housing situations and contribute to a broader support network for those experiencing homelessness.
- Within three years of operating, START's patient experience efforts have paid off: 99.6% of patients report that they are "likely to recommend" START.
- Patients who frequented WellSpan's ED for behavioral health issues, SUD and related social needs used the ED 22.15% less since engaging with START.
- START has treated nearly 3,000 patients and made approximately 500 appointments to address social needs.
- Clinicians have prescribed 1,100 medications for opioid use disorder.
- The program has resulted in a 20.58% boost in the Daily Living Activities-20 (DLA-20) scores, which measures individual quality of life and reduced

depression risk, as measured by Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) scores, by 46% upon discharge.

Michele Crosson, START's director, says the partnership with the local justice system has been "tremendous."

"We filled a lot of gaps since we've been able to provide more access," Crosson says. "It has made all the difference to many people."

In the words of a START program beneficiary, "Without [WellSpan's] support and their agency, I would have continued to make poor decisions and use drugs, which would've led me back to prison."

## Conclusion

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WellSpan Health's START program and Prison Reentry Program stands as models for communities grappling with complex health care and justice system challenges. By focusing on immediate access to care, building meaningful collaborations, and fostering a supportive and non-punitive environment, WellSpan Health showcased what's possible in driving real change and improvement in individual lives and community health.

## Contact

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### **Mitchell Crawford, D.O.**

Medical Director, Specialized Treatment and Recovery Team, and Director, Addiction Services, WellSpan Health



[mcrawford3@wellspan.org](mailto:mcrawford3@wellspan.org)