

Recovery navigators helping people get into a drug treatment



BUY PHOTO

New London Recovery Navigators Jeremy Dawson and Trisha Rios pose for a photo Wednesday, April 25, 2018, at Ledge Light Health District. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

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New London — Though they've been active for less than a month, the city's three part-time recovery navigators already have helped get 25 people into varying levels of drug treatment.

It's a sign not only of their effectiveness, Human Services Director Jeanne Milstein said, but also of the need in the city.

“The most important part of this is that the navigators are coming out and saving lives,” Milstein said. “At the same time, they’re identifying some of the systemic barriers: Why couldn’t this person get into treatment? What are these barriers, and how do we address those?”

The navigators are just one piece of a **\$135,000 grant Ledge Light Health District received in December** (<https://www.theday.com/policefirecourts/20171216/grant-to-help-opioid-action-team-streamline-access-to-treatment>). The University of Baltimore awarded 13 such grants, all of which were federally funded, to entities that use evidence-based practices and collaborate with law enforcement.

Early last month, members of the Opioid Action Team of Southeastern Connecticut explained the navigators’ role. Each works about 20 hours a week and spends some of that time visiting places where people may be struggling with addiction. Mark Peake swings by the free breakfasts offered at Engaging Heaven Church. Jeremy Dawson visits the Homeless Hospitality Center. And Trisha Rios makes trips to spots such as City Pier.

But they’re also willing to travel anywhere, within reason, where a person wants to meet. They know that many with opioid and other substance use disorders aren’t in shelters or at soup kitchens — they’re working and living as usual.

In each case, the navigators explain medication-assisted treatment options such as Suboxone, methadone and Vivitrol. Each works differently, but in general the medications allow a person to function without intense withdrawals or cravings.

The navigators then get to know their clients and help them access whichever treatment pathway seems most appropriate. Finding treatment program vacancies can be daunting for anyone, let alone someone who is teetering on the edge of sobriety. The navigators have a leg up because they’re already connected with many treatment providers.

For those who aren’t ready to seek treatment, the navigators discuss safer ways to use, such as visiting **Alliance for Living’s syringe exchange program** (<https://www.theday.com/article/20170915/NWS01/170919558>) or learning how to use naloxone, the overdose-reversal drug, and keeping some on hand.

Importantly, the navigators keep in touch with their clients throughout the process. They help those who are in treatment stay on track. And those who decline treatment know whom to call if one day they change their minds.

Jennifer Muggeo, Ledge Light’s supervisor of administration, finance and special projects, said about \$50,000 of grant money is budgeted to fund the positions, though that could change.

Carol Jones, who directs medical case management for Alliance for Living and has almost 30 years of sobriety under her belt, is overseeing the navigators’ work.

“We’re better than the worst things we’ve done in our lives,” she said.

Trisha Rios

Trisha Rios is a well-known symbol of recovery in the city where she has been for nearly two decades.

The 40-year-old started using drugs and running the streets as a teenager. When she finally got to a place where she was serious about her recovery, she needed help relearning even the most basic of life skills.

This week, she’ll celebrate nine years of being drug free.

“This is not just about me giving back,” Rios said of her work. “It’s showing people that I’m tangible evidence (of recovery). You can touch me, you can see me. I’m not perfect, but I can show you something different.”

Because of her background, Rios has almost a sixth sense when it comes to detecting who might need help. Recently, she was standing in a Dunkin' Donuts parking lot when she caught the eye of a person sitting in a car there. Following a hunch, she struck up a conversation with the person, who now is in treatment.

"I feel like this was a calling for me," she said.

Jeremy Dawson

While Jeremy Dawson isn't himself in recovery, addiction has profoundly impacted him.

Dawson, 41, was adopted early in life. Both of his biological parents used heroin.

"My biological mother, she (overdosed) off heroin in the bathroom," he said. "I didn't find out she was dead for three days. I never got to tell her that I understood why she used. I was never able to help her."

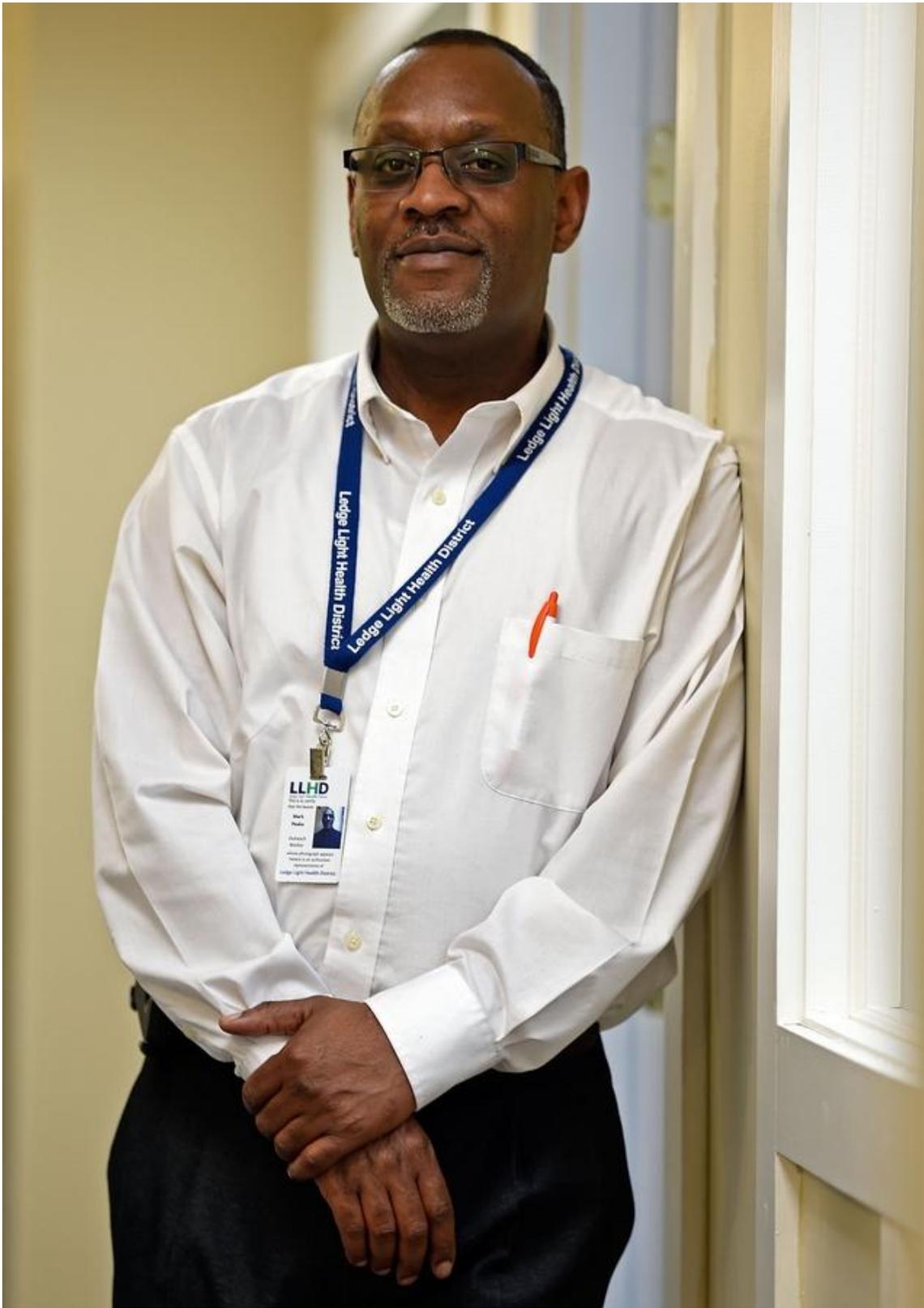
And though he stayed away from drugs, Dawson said he still made mistakes over the years, mostly by being destructive and "toxic in relationships."

Earlier this year, he found himself with nowhere to go but the Homeless Hospitality Center. His time there informs his approach as a navigator.

"I've made a lot of connections because I can say, 'I am you. At one point I slept next to you,'" Dawson said.

Dawson employs humor and practicality in the field. Recently, for example, he connected with someone by first helping him figure out how to work a computer.

"One of my guys called the other day and said, 'Someone offered me (drugs) today and I said no,'" Dawson recalled. "That's huge."



BOT PHOTO

New London Recovery Navigator Mark Peake poses for a photo Wednesday, May 2, 2018, at Ledge Light Health District. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

Mark Peake

Mark Peake has spent 50 of his 57 years in New London. For the last 14, he has been working as a counselor with the Southeastern Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence.

Like many who go on to become counselors in the field, Peake is in recovery. He started as a technician with SCADD and then, when a counselor position opened up, went back to school so he could apply.

In his short time working as a navigator on top of his full-time job with SCADD, Peake has met many people who didn't know about medication-assisted treatment and how it can help a person manage addiction without an inpatient stay.

Others, he said, wanted help but didn't know where to turn — until they met him.

"This is my community," said Peake, whose demeanor is calming. "I grew up here. I love here. I live here. I work here."

"I just want to be a part of helping people turn their life back around," he continued. "There's no better joy than helping somebody who's lost be found again."

To reach the navigators, call or text (860) 333-3494 or email nlcares@llhd.org (<mailto:nlcares@llhd.org>).

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