



FROM THE DIRECTORS

Welcome to the inaugural newsletter of HeadsUp! We are a collaborating organization whose mission is to help end the stigma around psychosis through education, advocacy, and support. We promote early intervention centered around personalized, accessible, and effective care for all people in Pennsylvania (PA), and provide support for all PA first episode psychosis (FEP) sites. In each quarterly newsletter, we will highlight one of our FEP centers, invite stakeholders to share perspectives on various aspects of FEP care, as well as highlight important updates, events, trainings and opportunities.

Upon assuming directorship of HeadsUp in January 2020, our HeadsUp team has pushed forward in multiple areas of planned growth – training, telehealth, program evaluation, outreach, and research. While continuing to offer our providers numerous professional development and training opportunities (including a series of cognitive therapy recovery workshops led by Aaron Brinen, PsyD and a series of psychopharmacology trainings led by Christian Kohler, MD), we are building our outreach capacity and social media presence through a newly launched website and development of customized outreach plans for current and incoming FEP sites. In June, we launched the HeadsUp Steering Committee, a group of stakeholders who will help guide our work to create a learning health care system for PA early psychosis centers.

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FEATURED CENTER

PEACE-PHILADELPHIA



From its inception in 2015 the PEACE program has successfully provided services to over 130 individuals in Philadelphia County aged 15-30 who have had a recent first experience with psychosis. All PEACE participants are receiving or eligible for Medicaid. PEACE is under the direction of Marie Wenzel and staffs 14 individuals including a full time occupational therapist and full-time nurse. PEACE is affiliated with Horizon House which serves more than 5,000 adults annually in Pennsylvania and Delaware. PEACE is a welcoming center where participants can visit during business hours and have access to an art room, a quiet space, desktop computers, educational groups and classes and engagement with other PEACE participants.



R. MARIE WENZEL,
PEACE
DIRECTOR

R. Marie Wenzel is deeply motivated to reduce stigma and increase access to mental health treatment, in particular the experience of psychosis. Marie's team is often trying innovative and non-traditional methods to engage young people in treatment and their lives. Marie has dedicated the last 4 years to expanding the PEACE program to reach as many young Philadelphians in need as possible. She finds early episode work fulfilling as it directly intersects with her passion and work for social justice and equity for all disenfranchised communities.

CONTRIBUTOR

SUPPORTING EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Bryann O'Brien, HOPE
Supported Employment
& Education Specialist

As COVID-19 swept across the country and lockdowns became the normal, the world took to a virtual environment to stay in touch and manage their day to day. We observed this first-hand with the participants in our First Episode Psychosis (FEP) program at the HOPE center (Wilkes-Barre, PA).

Academically, our youth have been directly impacted by being deprived of social interaction, missing life's most memorable moments, educational experiences and separated from their educators and role models. Instead of a regular school day, a virtual learning environment was implemented allowing students the ability to learn from home. Although this was the accepted course of action, our youth, along with youth across the country, have faced barriers to online learning. Lack of resources to complete assignments ranged from inability to access the internet, computers, and transportation. Some students faced language barriers which led to little assistance in terms of help at home.

Many students struggled to maintain a learning schedule to complete all of the work assigned by each teacher, and had difficulty with overcoming technological issues and trying to teach themselves with parents becoming their new educators while still coping with this new "normal" as well as any home demands. Students with IEP or 504 plans were not able to have accommodations actively met which directly affected their understanding of material and progression into the next school year. SAT and ACT tests were put on a halt, college visits pushed off; graduation, prom, school trips all ceased to exist.

Some FEP clients struggled to maintain the success they have achieved in the form of activities and socialization. Once indoors they were faced with more time to themselves which for some resulted in the increase of symptoms, even hospitalization, and had a direct impact on their learning and academics. In the aftermath of all of this, COVID-19 highlighted the flexibility of schooling and the use of online classrooms.

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EDUCATION

As some FEP clients have pointed out, there were some positives gained from online learning. Students were able to enjoy a more flexible school schedule, experience the coming together of a community, and online schooling encompassed students with chronic illness. Some students spent more time learning daily living skills at home. The HOPE team helped our participants deal with the anxiety, frustration, and boredom associated with physical distancing by teaching and encouraging utilization of mindfulness strategies and relaxation techniques, modeling and encouraging virtual connections, encouraging learning a new life skill, and helping to engage in creative activities outside or with others. The team encouraged participants to interact with each other through weekly virtual groups and challenged participants to educate the group on various topics. The HOPE team also provided psychoeducation on COVID-19 to participants and family members.

Overall, our team faces the novelty of these challenging times by embracing the virtual world to remain connected to our families and to help our participants maneuver the shifting world of education. We recognize there are pros and cons to these shifts, so daily re-assessment of mounting uncertainty is critical, but we remain confident we can continue to keep our participants engaged and uplifted until our society and its schools return to a more predictable pulse.



Bryann O'Brien is a graduate of The Pennsylvania State University where she earned her degree in Applied Psychology. Bryann currently is a student at Capella University where she is working towards her degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. Bryann works as the Supportive Employment/Education Specialist for the HOPE team through Children's Service Center.



FROM THE DIRECTORS CONT...

We are grateful and excited that 26 representatives from different stakeholder groups, including administrators, clinical staff, program participants, family members and mental health advocacy groups, have joined together to form our Steering Committee.

The activities of the last several months have occurred against the backdrop of unparalleled societal challenges and change. We marveled at our sites' impressive commitment and ability to continue providing high quality, evidence-based care even as our state, and indeed the world, shut down most in-person contacts as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We facilitated discussions about the experiences of our treatment program providers and clients during the transition from primarily in-person delivery of care to primarily telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic. In our research arm, we launched a study to identify and evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental, physical and financial wellbeing of providers and clients and to identify associated coping mechanisms. Our study of engagement in telehealth services during the pandemic will also inform our understanding of barriers to, and effectiveness of, telehealth services post-pandemic.

During this time, the nation's experience of a series of race-related tragedies and resulting protests led to increased conversations among our teams and clients about racism and injustice. These discussions informed our planning for the urgently important work of facilitating education and discussions about health disparities, racial biases and broader issues related to anti-racism and anti-bias.

We hope that a planned series of virtual workshops and trainings will help ensure that our sites feel prepared to foster a culture of open communication around these issues within their teams and with their clients.

In the next few months, we are planning several more expansions, including advancing the ability of our FEP programs to inform clinical care by improving access to participant's clinical data, and conducting rapid and efficient neurocognitive testing. We are very excited to welcome five new programs, serving Carbon/Monroe, Pike/Wayne, Centre, Chester, and Lehigh counties, into our Pennsylvania state-wide network, and look forward to supporting and collaborating with them as they grow their programs.

We are grateful for the support of OMHSAS (Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services), SAMHSA (through the Community Mental Health Services Block Grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, US Department of Health and Human Services), and our providers, participants, families and mental health advocates for our collaborative efforts as we strive to achieve the HeadsUp mission.

Monica E. Calkins, Ph.D.
Co-Director



Christian G. Kohler, M.D.
Co-Director



SPECIAL UPDATES & UPCOMING EVENTS

We are so excited to be welcoming 5 new Pennsylvania First Episode Psychosis Centers in 2021. We look forward to meeting the new teams and working together to expand our impact.