



## Table of Contents:

<u>Project OPEN Update</u>	page 1
<u>Using Worksource Oregon</u>	page 2
<u>Success Stories: Gina Hahn (Part 1)</u>	page 3
<u>Director's Corner: What is Peer Support?</u>	page 5

## **Project OPEN Update:**

Hello from Mental Health America of Oregon! Project OPEN is now in its fifth month and our first group of Peer Employment Mentors has completed three days of training!

Participants in the first year of Project OPEN include ten peer employees from six different agencies in Oregon: Folktime, Pacific Crossroads, Empowerment Initiatives, NAMI Multnomah/Northstar, Benton County Peer Wellness Program, and Northwest Human Services.

The Employment Peer Mentors learned about the values that underpin peer-to-peer employment supports:

- Work can promote recovery for consumer/survivors.

- Consumer/survivors should be supported to choose from the full range of jobs and careers and have the opportunity to learn about jobs that are unfamiliar to them.
- Consumer/Survivors should be supported to develop their own career path and to choose from the same paths that others do such as getting a job right away, getting more training and education, or starting a business
- Consumer/survivors should be supported to choose and direct the services and supports that will help them reach their goals. These services might include: college, technical school, a professional job developer, Vocational Rehabilitation, WorkSource (see article below), or others.

The training also covered Person-Directed Career Planning, and various methods of career research. Throughout the year, the Employment Peer Mentors will attend webinars and quarterly trainings to gain skills and learn about resources that will help them support peers to find meaningful employment.

**In this issue:** Information about Worksource Oregon – a state-wide resource for employment and career training as well as part one of Gina's Story: One Woman's Journey from Benefits to Meaningful Work.

## Employment Search Resources: Worksource Oregon

Often the key to finding employment, or supporting our peers to do so, is using resources in the community that provide tools and support for the search. One of these resources is Worksource Oregon, a statewide network that connects workers with the businesses that need them. Worksource Oregon has over forty Worksource Centers throughout our state as well as a website providing employment resources and tools. Although the centers are not all the same, here are some of the resources provided by the different centers:

- Computers with internet access, printers, and fax machines for job searches
- A Resource Room, often staffed with a support person, containing materials and resources to help with your search
- Workshops on interviewing, resume making, and other skills
- Classes on math, reading, or office skills
- Worksource Centers also sometimes have funding available for specific skill building and vocational programs

Worksource Oregon also has a website ([worksourceoregon.org](http://worksourceoregon.org)) that contains a lot of useful tools for a job search:

- Links to job opening lists in multiple online locations
- Information about job fairs and other employment related events
- Information and links to training programs, apprenticeship programs, and educational opportunities

- Specified resources for people with disabilities, Veterans, and justice involved individuals

What to expect: The centers are open to anyone looking for employment, and they do ask you to take a test that measures skill levels and helps the center staff guide you to the right services. You can bring a support person with you or get other accommodations to get through the assessment process, so don't let it stand in the way of using the services at a Worksource Center.

Here is the contact information for some of the centers throughout Oregon. You can find additional center contact information at [worksourceoregon.org](http://worksourceoregon.org) or contact one of the centers below to ask if there is one in your location:

Coos Bay: (541) 756-8459  
Corvallis: (541) 757-4261  
LaGrande: (541) 963-7111  
Medford (541) 776-7111  
Pendleton (541) 276-9050  
Portland (503) 280-6046  
Salem (503) 378-4846





## **Success Stories: One Woman's Journey from Benefits to Meaningful Employment (Part One)**

Gina is one of Project OPEN's Employment Peer Mentors. She is employed full-time at Empowerment Initiatives, a peer-run agency, and is providing employment peer mentor supports to participants in the agency's programs. Gina's own story is one that has already inspired many and will definitely be a source of hope to those the peers she is mentoring.

Gina worked at various jobs before receiving social security benefits due to mental health issues. She began working when she was still in high school, providing bookkeeping and office help for her parents' logging company. After graduating from high school, she attended beauty school, and then found work as a hairdresser. After the birth of her first daughter, Gina left her position at the beauty shop to focus on parenting and later found work sorting bottles at a grocery store. Over the following years, Gina had a second daughter and split time between parenting and working. She worked again as a hairdresser and helped her husband to run their farm and buy and restore cars from auction.

Things changed dramatically for Gina when she was forced to leave her marriage due to domestic violence. In this horrible situation, she found herself single and without primary custody of her daughters. Her mental health challenges as well as some physical health challenges were increasing. Gina stopped taking the medication she had been prescribed, left home, and began a multiple week journey of travelling around the country. Disconnected from her family and friends, things became increasingly difficult. A

combination of factors led to a moment where Gina found herself in a truck stop bathroom in Wyoming looking in the mirror and realizing that she did not recognize herself. She reached out to friends from her church community and began the arduous journey of finding her way back to stability. She stayed with a friend in Pendleton, and got involved with a 12-step program. Her mind began to clear, and she began to get her feet on the ground. She applied to get on disability benefits, but was denied. She began the process of reconnecting to her family and started again to take medication for her medical and mental health needs.

As Gina wove her way through the appeals process for social security, she volunteered at a bird store and focused on her recovery. On the final appeal for social security, Gina had an attorney for the first time, and was awarded both social security disability benefits and supplemental security income. When Gina was awarded her benefits, she was told that she received it because "she wouldn't be able to work, even part-time, that she wouldn't be able to work without having a supervisor watching over her at all times, and that she would not be able to manage her own finances."

Gina moved back to the Portland area and began receiving mental health services. She supported herself using her SSI/SSD, attended groups and appointments and continued her involvement with her 12-step groups.

In spite of the dire pronouncements made during her social security hearing, Gina maintained her desire to work. In the fall of 2001, Gina began to work with staff at her mental health agency on her work goals. They connected her to Vocational Rehabilitation where she completed initial assessments and began working with a Vocational Counselor.

**In Next Month's Issue: Part 2 - Gina pursues her dream!**

## Why Peer Support?

One of the main goals of Project OPEN is to create a group of Employment Peer Mentors trained to provide strengths-based career and education supports to other peers. This is a different and unique model from current employment supports available to consumers in Oregon, and one that we believe will be very successful in helping consumer/survivor peers achieve their goals. Why do we believe so strongly in this model?

The answer lies in the unique benefits offered by peer support. What is peer support? For current or former consumers of mental health services, peer support generally means support from another person who has been a consumer of services and/or experienced mental health issues. Some of the unique benefits of peer support in mental health are:

- Equality: a support relationship with equal footing and sharing similar life experiences
- Mutual healing: The opportunity for the support relationship to provide healing for both individuals involved
- Empowerment: finding hope by seeing that recovery is possible
- Responsibility: taking charge of our own healing/recovery
- Strengths-based supports: emphasis on our strengths and gifts, not deficits and labels
- Goals and dreams: an environment where the goal is creating the life you want, not merely symptom mitigation

Project OPEN's goal is to create a core group of Employment Peer Mentors in Oregon who will bring a focus on strengths to the work of helping

peers find meaningful education and employment. We believe that this strategy will lead to different and more successful outcomes than other employment support strategies.

Strengths-based career planning and support is founded on the belief that everyone has unique strengths, capacities, and skills, and everyone can work. Instead of focusing on deficits, planning focuses on identifying strengths and helping people gain insight into what works and what doesn't work for them in a work environment. Employment peer mentors help individuals identify their long-term career and life goals and then identify what steps to take to achieve them. Peer mentors are knowledgeable about community employment resources through both professional and personal experience and are able to help individuals choose what resources to use and access them successfully.

Peer mentors are also able to use their lived experience to offer advice, strategies, and encouragement for the journey. The mentors themselves are living the reality of doing meaningful work while in mental health recovery, and this empowers the people they support to achieve their goals.

