

Covid Peer Support volunteers may change the game nationally for people in recovery

A collaboration between the South East HSE, DSP, and a Kilkenny Family Resource Centre, designed to better support people with addictions may be about to change the way we think about supporting people in drug and alcohol recovery in Ireland.

Minister Hildegard Naughton launched the findings of research by the South East Technical University (SETU) in the Neighbourhood Hall in Kilkenny last week. The research project, which lasted almost three years and was co-produced with users of the service, assessed the peer-led, volunteer run, 7 day a week online recovery service **Better Together**.

'It's an ill wind that blows no good for somebody and Covid lockdowns have proven to have come to some good for Irish people impacted by drug and alcohol addiction and struggling to recover.' said Stephen Murphy, Chairperson of the South East Regional Drug and Alcohol Task Force (SERDATF) and Director of Services with the Fr. McGrath Family Resource Centre.

Better Together brings volunteers with lived experience of addiction together with those trying to overcome drug and alcohol addictions. The programme was an innovation to try to continue support for those struggling with addiction over Covid lockdowns. The programme provided over 100,000 hours of online peer support during the Covid years and is now providing an average of 25,000 hours a year of online support by people with lived experience to people in recovery.

Stand Out SETU Research Findings:

Amongst the findings of their co-produced research, Veronica Campbell, South East Technological University President, who introduced the research at the launch, highlighted that –

- ❑ 86.4% reported a decrease in incidents of relapse or self harm
- ❑ 97% reported improved social and emotional connections
- ❑ 92.5% reported diminished internal and social stigma since joining **Better Together**
- ❑ More than 90% of participants reported the 7 day a week 365 days a year online service as safe and accessible.

Better Together Coordinator, Laura Hardiman, who is employed by the Fr. McGrath Family Resource Centre and funded by the South East HSE to develop the **Better Together** pilot project said:

"Today is just the beginning for **Better Together**. We will continue to lead the way as community change makers and innovators in peer leadership support and lived experience initiatives.

What has been captured today is the joy and hope that breathes life into our communities, and shows the evidence that recovery is always possible."

SERDATF worker, Jim O'Dwyer, told those present at the launch that at the heart of the success of the partnership SERDATF developed, were the many people with lived experience who are giving their time voluntarily as peer support workers.

Jim said: 'It would be a mistake to call what **Better Together** does as voluntary, 7 day a week 365 days a year over its four years. It is 'Peer led' and it truly deserves that name.

'People join **Better Together** because they need a safe space and the truth is that we, the HSE and our communities, needed you also.

'Your passion and commitment, your expertise and love has started something in the South East that may help Ireland change the way we address addiction and trauma recovery.

'We all feel it here today, we all needed it. We needed the whole story. We needed you.'

Jim added: 'For some of you this will be the first time you are hearing about Better Together - but *I am certain that for all of you* - it will not be the last.'

People interested in learning more about **Better Together** can click on the serdatf.ie website for further information.

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