



Wisconsin Community Services, Inc.
CREATING OPPORTUNITIES TO OVERCOME ADVERSITY

WCS Connection

April 2024



From the desk of the WCS President & CEO:

Let's Find Better Solutions to Suspending Students

Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) continues to have a challenge with suspensions, as nearly 16,000 took place in the first two months of 2024. According to MPS officials, this figure represents a 7% increase over the same period in 2023. The numbers are even more startling if examined along racial lines with Black students suspended at a disproportionately higher rate than other students (MPS has provided monthly suspension updates since September of 2020, after an investigation by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights concluded that MPS disproportionately suspended or expelled Black students.) Historically, MPS has had much higher suspension rates than other districts statewide and even across the country. This problem has long vexed educators, elected officials, advocates, parents, and others concerned by what this all means and how it portends the future of our community.

MPS has a current enrollment of about 67,500 students, and at the current pace, suspensions will exceed enrollments for the year. While many may see this as an MPS problem, it is something that goes far beyond its walls. It is an indicator that reflects other challenges that communities encounter and has a lot to do with the social and emotional well-being of children and families. Some research suggests practices that over-rely on suspensions to improve school safety and discipline may be harming students' long-term success and do not have a positive effect on the school community. If you look beyond the school community, it is not difficult to see negative impacts elsewhere including unemployment, mental and emotional well-being, crime, incarceration, and other social determinants of health that undermine family and community well-being.

We all have a stake in the success of public education and how it shapes the future of our community. This means that we should all be willing to dig in and find other solutions to supporting students who present challenges in ways that don't result in kicking them out of the classroom and onto a path that will diminish their prospects for a healthy and productive future.

Clarence Johnson



CSRC Youth Learn Urban Agriculture



Youth enrolled in the WCS Community Service & Restitution Coordination Program (CSRC) are receiving lessons in urban agriculture thanks to a partnership with Embassy Center MKE. WCS leases space there for its Project Excel site, which is the home to the CSRC. Given the overlap in populations served, the neighboring Cultivate Program has brought CSRC youth into the fold. The church designed its Cultivate Program to teach youth about entrepreneurship through urban agriculture. In a recent session, Embassy Center MKE Pastor and Cultivate Manager, Jason Mims, discussed how urban agriculture presents a welcoming space where youth can use their talents and passions to generate income. The students not only learned about growing herbs and vegetables, but they also got lessons in the importance of respecting oneself and others, and how they are stronger when they work together. The supplemental education provided by Cultivate enriches the youths' overall experience through CSRC, which provides meaningful opportunities for them to complete community service, thus fulfilling program requirements and gaining the satisfaction of making amends.

WCS Hosts Better Ways to Cope Celebration and Black Balloon Day

From left: Chad Meinholdt, WCS V.P. of Behavioral Health Services; Startina White, WCS Assistant Director of Hub & Spoke Health Home and the Community Based Peer Programs; and Clarence Johnson, WCS CEO.



On March 6th, WCS hosted a press conference at its North Avenue Campus recognizing Black Balloon Day, an annual event held in remembrance of those who have lost their lives to a substance use overdose. The annual event raises awareness to the substance use crisis in Milwaukee County. County Executive David Crowley, Alderman Michael Murphy, and Samad's House Leader Tahira Malik highlighted the importance of community collaboration and harm reduction strategies while remembering the lives lost and the families impacted by substance use.

The afternoon featured the Better Ways to Cope Celebration hosted by the Milwaukee County Department of Health & Human Services Behavioral Health Services Division. Better Ways to Cope is a substance use prevention campaign that improves the public's access to information and resources that reduce overdose deaths, increase harm reduction strategies, and increase healthy coping in the community.

WCS discussed how the Hub and Spoke Maternal Health Team serves pregnant women and mothers with a focus on safe and healthy pregnancy. The program provides individualized services to mothers and families navigating needs related to substance use, mental health, and basic living needs. The team is led by peer specialists who utilize their valuable lived experience to engage and serve women through a person-centered recovery plan. Several other organizations funded by the campaign presented during the 2.5-hour program, including Black Space HQ, Changing Hands Mentoring, Inc., INPOWER Solution, Mack Theatre Group, and Samad's House.

WCS Presents at Wisconsin Peer Recovery Conference



WCS Peer Service Coordinator Susie Austin made a presentation at the annual Wisconsin Peer Recovery Conference on April 12. She was joined by the Waukesha-based Certified Peer Specialist team. Pictured from left: Karl Lindner, Jamie Soteropoulos, Melissa Battermann, Carmen Arteaga, Austin, Erin Pinter, and Stephanie Weare.

The state's leading employer of certified peer specialists, WCS, was invited to present at the 8th Annual Wisconsin Peer Recovery Conference held April 11-12 in Wisconsin Dells. Peer Services Coordinator Susie Austin presented the Reboot Skills Workshop that she developed to continuously train employees to keep the workforce true to the certified peer support profession. "I have observed many professionals who have veered away from the basic principles of peer support, meaning they have taken on different roles or have been asked to do things that are not in the scope of practice of the profession," says Austin. "By listening and observing I have found it very important to continually support our workforce with ongoing development to remain focused on the basics. I have learned that by talking through scenarios that certified peer specialists have experienced, problems are solved, and ideas created. It has been my experience that role playing a situation teaches in a respectful and strength-based way."

Hub & Spoke receives \$150,000 donation from Anthem

WCS leadership and staff accepted a \$150,000 check from the Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation during an April 11 event at the WCS North Avenue Campus. The funding will benefit the WCS Hub & Spoke Health Home, where care coordinators and peer specialists serve adults with substance use needs through a health home model in collaboration with a network of "spokes," such as health systems, outpatient providers, and recovery housing.



Pictured above from left: Ted Osthelder, President of Anthem Medicaid Health Plan; Kalan Haywood, State Representative for Wisconsin's 16th Assembly District; Russell Stamper, Alderman for Milwaukee's 15th District; Craig Sarnow, Milwaukee Police Department Assistant Chief; Clarence Johnson, WCS CEO; and Milwaukee Mayor Cavalier Johnson.



Pictured above from left: Megan Skaggs, WCS Director of Youth Behavioral Health Programs & Community Based Peer Specialist Programs; Cassie Krystosek, Lead Recovery Navigator at WCS; Startina White, Assistant Director of Hub & Spoke Health Home at WCS; Chad Meinholdt, WCS Vice President of Behavioral Health Services; and Alexis Atkinson, who spoke about the positive impact WCS programming has had on her recovery journey.

New NOVA House Opens

Many gathered March 14 for the opening of NOVA House, which will provide much-needed supportive housing to 14 individuals continuing their substance use recovery. Pictured from left: Toree Johnson, NOVA House Program Manager; Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley, and WCS CEO Clarence Johnson.



Looking for People to Join the WCS Team!

Are you a dedicated, diligent, and caring individual? Why not work at WCS and become part of the team in one of the following positions:

[Recovery Navigator – Hub & Spoke](#)

Make a positive impact on the lives of community members with significant substance use and co-occurring mental health needs as a Recovery Navigator in the Hub & Spoke Health Home program. Qualified candidates can engage people through an approach that is strength-based, trauma-informed, person-centered, and culturally intelligent. The person hired for this position must provide direct service to approximately 12 people per week. She or he will work closely with the Lead Recovery Navigator and WCS Hub Team to serve people referred to the program. To be considered for hire, candidates must have a high school diploma or GED/HSED and knowledge and/or experience serving people with substance use needs. A bachelor's degree in social work, Psychology, Nursing, or Social Services is preferred.

[Youth Treatment Specialist – Bakari Youth Residential Care Center](#)

Youth treatment specialists at this state-licensed residential care center have the rewarding opportunity to help male youth, ages 13-17 through a 6-month treatment program. They not only supervise the youth in the program, but they also empower them using evidence-based practices, such as Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), trauma-informed care, motivational interviewing, and other youth-centered. To be considered for hire, candidates must have a high school diploma or equivalent, be at least 21 years of age, and have a minimum of one year of experience working with children who have mental health needs. A bachelor's degree is preferred.

[Case Manager – Parsons House Residential Reentry Center](#)

Motivate others to achieve their treatment goals as a case manager at Parsons House Residential Reentry Center. The individual hired vacant will provide direct counseling and case management for correctional residents under the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Each case manager is assigned a caseload of up to 30 residents. They schedule meetings with United States Probation Officers, the Bureau of Prisons RRM Office, and Community Treatment Services. Case managers also monitor residents' progress toward individualized program plans. To be considered for hire, candidates must have at least two years of counseling experience, a bachelor's degree related to the social services field, the ability to perform CPR, and a valid driver's license.

We invite you to visit www.wiscs.org/careers to view a full list of current job openings at WCS.

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Wisconsin Community Services, Inc. (WCS) advocates for justice and community safety, providing innovative opportunities for individuals to overcome adversity.

WCS is a 501(c) 3 non-profit agency that provides services in southeastern Wisconsin.
WCS has been serving the community successfully for 111 years.

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