

Wheeler Clinic expands services for LGBTQ+ residents





Nicole Heady poses in front of the progress pride flag at the Wheeler Family Health & Wellness Center at 91 Northwest Dr. in Plainville on Oct. 14. Heady is the peer support specialist for Walk With Me at Wheeler. The center offers a full continuum of affirming, integrated primary and behavioral health care services for LGBTQ+ clients, patients, students, and staff.

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By Cris Villalonga-Vivoni, Record-Journal staff

Wheeler Clinic received a \$5,000 grant from Main Street Community Foundation to expand its outpatient clinic for LGBTQ+ people. Called Walk with Me, the program provides primary care, behavioral health care and peer support for all queer Connecticut residents and their families.

“We’re able to... provide patients, their parents, their caregivers, guidance and strategies to help navigate their child and their family’s journey,” said Sabrina Trocchi, president and CEO of Wheeler Clinic.

The program was founded in 2021 after Wheeler Clinic received an anonymous \$100,000 donation to fund medical and behavioral services for LGBTQ+ people.

At first, the track was only available at Wheeler’s Plainville location and only accepted queer youth clients. But, Trocchi explained that the Walk with Me team quickly realized the need to expand services to all LGBTQ+ people in Connecticut.

“We’re trying to do as much as we can to ensure that wherever you live, you do have access to specialty LGBTQ+ services,” she said.

According to a 2020 state [survey](#), 64% of LGBTQ+ respondents had concerns about accessing healthcare. Similarly, 55% of respondents were concerned about accessing mental health, addiction and substance abuse help. Their concerns about accessing care are related to services not being LGBTQ+ friendly or knowledgeable in queer health and the cost of care.

Walk with Me essentially eliminates all three barriers by providing a multidimensional program that allows for wrap-around services to ensure that clients have access to anything they need to live confidently as themselves. In addition, they will not turn anyone away due to their inability to pay, according to the Wheeler Clinic website.

Gender-affirming primary care is available at all five Wheeler Clinic Health and Wellness centers in Bristol, Hartford, New Britain, Plainville and Waterbury. However, behavioral and peer-support services are only available at the Plainville and Hartford locations.

The behavioral health director of Walk with Me in Hartford, Jessica Arnold, said that the behavioral team comprises two clinicians and two peer-support specialists.

She said that the behavioral clinicians are trained in trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy and EMDR — eye movement, desensitization and reprocessing. Arnold explained that these therapy models are popular, evidence-supported practices.

In addition, Arnold said that all staff, including the front desk and janitorial staff, were intensively trained in providing gender-affirming care.

“Feeling comfortable when you walk into a [medical appointment] that maybe you’ve done so many times before and in just complete and utter fear and being able to provide a safe space for clients should be the norm,” she said.

Trocchi explained that peer-support specialists are not medical providers. Instead, LGBTQ+ identifying people with lived experience help clients manage day-to-day needs and provide extra support. In addition, their community ties allow the specialist to build a deeper connection with their clients.

She said that the specialists’ support is not a billable service, so the grant will be used to expand their services further and hire more staff.

The peer-support specialist “really serves as a mentor, as a peer, as someone who’s gone through and has lived experience and is critical in making the connections to ensure that the patients are following up, receiving the services and engaged in the care that they need,” Trocchi said.

Arnold estimated that Walk with Me currently serves 120 clients across the entire program. Trocchi added that the program does not have a waitlist.

Peer-support specialists

Nicole Heady is the Walk with Me peer-support specialist at the Plainville location and identifies as cisgender and pansexual. Heady, who uses she/they pronouns, joined the team soon after the program started because they wanted to give back to their community.

“I wanted to share my experience and be able to help others through what I’ve already been through,” Heady said.

Heady wears many hats as a peer-support specialist. They host and attend program-wide events, help clients with non-medical needs, host numerous support groups and work with a client’s designated support systems, such as family or friends.

Arnold explained that the specialists hold bachelor’s degrees but said they are primarily hiring people with lived experiences. Specialists can support clients at any stage of their queer journey, whether questioning, transitioning, coming out, etc. In addition, they can

continue engaging with the client until the client feels ready to move forward with treatment options.

“Our clinicians are wonderful at navigating that really difficult transition for parents as well as clients. Whether it be the client is just exploring, the client is curious, the client is questioning, the client is angry about what they’re going through, so allowing that younger client to go through those emotions in that experience with the clinician until the client is ready.”

Heady said that clients ask for help on various topics, such as help coming out, getting hormones and changing legal names. Specialists can even help their clients find gender-affirming clothing.

“Sometimes our transgender clients have no idea how to buy a suit. They’ve never had to buy a suit before. So you help them make those changes so they can feel comfortable with themselves,” she said. “So it’s a lot more than just, ‘how are you feeling today?’ It’s being hands on, and it’s helping them with anything that they would need in order to feel happy, confident and safe.”

Developing natural support systems

A vital aspect of the Walk with Me medical and behavioral track is the inclusion of the patient’s designated support systems, such as family members and caregivers, that the patient feels comfortable with.

“Although therapy is wonderful, we are very temporary. We get to know clients for a very, very small portion of their life,” Heady said. The goal then is “to build up those natural supports and really encourage the client to reach out to those natural supports... so that they don’t have to be in therapy forever.”

Arnold explained that clinicians help clients identify their support systems and discern how much knowledge they would like that person to know to ensure privacy.

The peer-support specialists run parent support groups on a bi-monthly basis. Arnold said that they do this so parents and caregivers have adequate space to ask questions and share emotions, especially for parents of younger clients so that they can return to their loved ones with nothing but support.

“There is nothing worse than having that parent [or] guardian go into their emotions, their sadness and their feelings, while this client... already has enough on them, never mind having to carry someone else’s weight on top of that,” she said.

A nationwide [survey](#) by Trevor Project of 40,000 LGBTQ+ identifying youths reported that 68% had symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder, 55% had a major depressive disorder and 40% seriously considered attempting suicide in 2020. In addition, 3 in 4 gender-

diverse individuals report having an anxiety disorder and 2 in 3 reported having a major depressive disorder.

Nearly 15% of respondents attempted suicide, including more than 1 in 5 transgender and gender-diverse individuals.

In 2019, a similar Trevor Project [survey](#) found that LGBTQ+ youth were 40% less likely to attempt suicide if they had at least one accepting adult in their life.

Heady said that Wheeler Clinic recognized that not all LGBTQ+ people have support from their families, so they have opened up their services to include friends or found family, which describes a family created by choice rather than biologically.

“Blood is not the end all be all. I like to say collect family along the way. Because sometimes, even if we do have the support of our family, they might not understand they might not know because they don’t live it,” they said. “Sometimes people do abandon their family members because of this... And sometimes that’s all they have is their found family.”

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