

## Finding help from those who've been there before

11:36 PM Sep 20, 2012



Written by:  
James Fisher  
The News Journal

Jim Martin, manager of a resource center in Seaford, stands in front of Haven at the Peer, where the residents run the show. JAMES FISHER/THE NEWS JOURNAL

**SEAFORD** — Four years ago, Jim Martin was jobless and homeless, a position in which he never expected to find himself.

"The main reason was I was recovering from alcoholism. But another big reason was I didn't have a job," Martin said, explaining how he ended up in a Wilmington shelter. "I was like a scared little bunny hiding in the corner, thinking, 'How am I going to get through all this?'"

Fast forward to present day, and Martin's back on his feet in Seaford, managing a resource center for the homeless and people with mental health or addiction problems. On Wednesday, he showed off the center's newest project, Haven at the Peer, a house for homeless people where the residents run the show — collecting rent from each other and setting house rules.

It follows a model that expects people getting back on their feet to learn skills from each other. It's here, in part, as a consequence of the wide-ranging reforms to how Delaware cares for the mentally ill mandated by an agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice.

"It takes you from a nobody into a somebody," Martin said of Haven at the Peer's approach. "We want people to sit in the driver's seat."

People who live in the home, which accommodates six, pay \$100 a week in rent and can cook meals, talk to each other about job opportunities and get counseling at the

ACE Center next door, a year-old state-funded resource center for people in crises.

James Dawson, a 64-year-old veteran with a trimmed white beard and a knack for conversation, moved in Wednesday.

"A year ago, when I came here, I was a total wreck," Dawson said. "I had a lot of combat fatigue. I learned how to deal with it. It doesn't always work out that way." Now, feeling stronger and safer, he hopes to become the Haven's house captain, leading meetings and mentoring other residents.

The peer model, which eschews round-the-clock staff, is not a new concept. The Oxford House model, in which people with drug or alcohol addiction join group homes run by others in recovery, is in place in dozens of homes around the state. A Wilmington peer center, the Rick VanStory Center, started in March 2009 and has since expanded.

But peer-led recovery wasn't widely embraced in Delaware until it was promoted in the 2011 settlement ordering changes in mental health services, said Dara Schumaier, a community relations officer with the Department of Health and Social Services. The department now supports the Haven and other programs through contracts and grant funding.

"You have people with lived experience in recovery helping other people," Schumaier said. "It's very successful and been used for a long time. Delaware's very late to the game on this."

Haven and the ACE Center are operated by Fellowship Health Resources, which also provides psychiatric services, counseling and group living programs in several states.

Schumaier said it's helpful for people having difficult times in their lives to talk to each other directly.

"It gives them a place to go and basically rebuild their lives," she said. "A place where they're valued for who they are and not seen as their diagnosis."

Contact James Fisher at [jfisher@delawareonline.com](mailto:jfisher@delawareonline.com)